

A Farm-Bred Unionist

Cesar Estrada Chavez

THE deep hunger that Cesar Chavez felt yesterday as he came off his 25-day fast in California was not entirely new for the Mexican-American labor leader. He has experienced hunger before.

The unionist was born on March 31, 1927, on a small Arizona farm near Yuma,

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where his family scratched out a precarious living. His father went broke when Cesar was 10 years old.

and the family began to trail the harvest as migrant workers.

The young labor leader remembers the winter of 1938, when he stopped on the way home from school to fish and cut mustard greens to keep the family from starving. More than 30 schools later, Cesar had climbed to the pestilent slum near San Jose, Calif., called "Sal Si Puedes (Get out if you can.)"

Even today, as director of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., Mr. Chavez, his wife Helen and eight children live in a faded two-bedroom frame house in Delano, Calif., and scrape along on about \$300 a month.

Cesar Estrada Chavez's almost complete lack of interest in material comforts tells a great deal about the short (5 feet 6 inches) and once stocky labor leader with the shock of jet black hair. He is soft-spoken and unassuming, but he burns with a consuming desire to lift the lot of his people.

Talented and Energetic

Why does a talented and energetic young man make such a sacrifice? "For many years I was a farm worker," he once explained, "a migratory worker, and, well, personally, and I'm being very frank, maybe it's just a matter of trying to even the score, you know."

Mr. Chavez first came to wide public attention in 1965, when he called a strike of grape pickers in the hot and fertile San Joaquin Valley around Delano. Since then, his fledgling union has won about a dozen contracts with major wine processors.

The struggle, Mr. Chavez himself admits, is far from over. But he has succeeded, where others failed for 30 years, in building the foundation for the nation's first viable farm worker union.

One reason for his success is that Mr. Chavez is a charismatic leader who has capitalized on the ethnic bonds among the Mexican-Americans, and invested his cause with religious and civil rights overtones. The growers fight-

ing him accuse him of being an outside agitator, socialist—or worse.

"Chavez's secret is that he has the utter loyalty of the Mexican workers," said one grower. "His appeal is primarily racial—and to some extent religious. They're not a trade union, they're a racial and religious organization."

Another reason for his success is that Mr. Chavez is a patient and diligent man who began his strike only after three years of laying groundwork. Even before that, he had honed his organizing talents for 10 years with Saul Alinsky's Community Service Organization in California, rising to national director in 1958.

Fred Ross, an Alinsky associate who now is the union's organizing director, "found" the young Mexican-American while trying to get a program going in San Jose in 1952. Three times, he recalled recently, Mr. Chavez stood him up in appointments arranged through a mutual friend.

"The fourth night I went back, and the house was loaded with people," Mr. Ross said. Mr. Chavez had brought his friends, but he was doubting and would not even look Mr. Ross in the eye. He had one question: Could the Community Service Organization pave the way for unionizing farm workers?

Potential Leader

"He looked to me like potentially the best grass roots leader I'd ever run into," said Mr. Ross, who had been dealing with farm workers since the 1930's. After the meeting, Mr. Chavez accompanied Mr. Ross to another event and, before the night was out, "he just burst into flame about the thing."

Mr. Chavez runs his union out of a small office with orange burlap curtains in a pink stucco house surrounded by a peeling white picket fence on the edge of Delano. Whether walking the picket lines or addressing the A.F.L.-C.I.O. convention, he wears cotton slacks and an open-necked sport shirt, usually with tail waving.

"There is a large and increasing demand for organization from many places around the country," Mr. Chavez said in a recent interview. "Almost everywhere I go to speak, somewhere in the vicinity there are farm workers. So a network is being built."

"A big job has to be done and we know it," he said. "It will take many years. But," he added with quiet conviction, "we know that a union of farm workers is going to be built somehow because the workers are on the move, and they want a union."

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