

WHAT ABOUT TEXAS? THE FORGOTTEN CAUSE  
OF ANTONIO ORENDAIN AND THE  
RÍO GRANDE VALLEY FARM  
WORKERS, 1966-1982

by

TIMOTHY PAUL BOWMAN

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE MAKING OF A *HUELGISTA*

Antonio Orendain was born on May 28, 1930, in Etzatlán, Mexico.<sup>1</sup> He was only educated through elementary school and often worked as an impoverished *campesino* (a Mexican farm worker). In 1950 at the age of twenty, Orendain entered California illegally. Hungry and broke, he heard that American farm owners suffered from a labor shortage following World War II. Like many of his compatriots, Orendain thought the United States was the “land of opportunity.” He crossed the border and entered San Ysidro, California, lured by rumors of farm workers making as much as \$1.60 per hour – a sum which in Mexico was unheard of. To Orendain, the decision to cross the border illegally seemed logical:

The worst part of it in Mexico [was] to be too close to the United States and so far away from God. If I [had] a great need in Mexico, I am pretty sure need is the mother of all inventions. And I was hungry and needy, and since I was so close to the United States, I [did not] have to invent some way in order to solve the problem. I didn’t have to break my head to solve the problem, because everybody said the United States was easy. So maybe with those ideas, like there [was] a lot of work here, is [why] I migrated here.

This enterprising young man sought a better life and brighter future.<sup>2</sup>

The harsh realities of farm labor in the United States soon darkened his optimism.

With only seasonal work available, Orendain migrated between California, Idaho, Oregon,

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Orendain to Allen McCreight, November 14, 1978, Folder 1, Texas Farm Worker’s Union Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter TFWUP-UT); Antonio Orendain, interview by Charles Carr Winn, 20 July 1971, transcript, Oral History Project, University Library Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter OHP-UTA).

<sup>2</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

and Montana. He began noticing injustices growers on large farms committed against workers. For example, Orendain noticed that he and other young, healthy workers were often hired to displace older, slower workers. Since farm workers had no legal recourse, Orendain recognized this as opportunistic cruelty by the growers. He also fell victim to cruel growers who threatened to have him and other illegal workers deported unless they agreed to work for free. To avoid this, Orendain adopted Americanized Hispanic last names (such as Gómez or Hernández), claiming that people would be less likely to assume he was an illegal than when used his real name. In this manner Orendain struggled from 1950 until 1955, migrating from place to place and making about \$2.35 per day. After seeing how bad conditions were for Mexican workers, he realized that the only medium capable of changing this unfair system would be a farm workers' union. This epiphany would change his life.<sup>3</sup>

While working in Los Angeles in 1951, Orendain met a dynamic young man who steered him toward labor organizing – César Estrada Chávez. Originally from Yuma, Arizona, Chávez came to Los Angeles to work for the Community Service Organization (CSO).<sup>4</sup> CSO was based in East Los Angeles and its purpose was to assist Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in barrios across California. Its activities included protesting police brutality, helping people with immigration issues, and assisting the unemployed. The

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; Jacques E. Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1966), 9; Juan Gómez-Quinónez, *Mexican-American Labor, 1790-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 243. Levy's book contains autobiographical passages by Chávez and other UFW leaders on the first 10 years of the movement.

talented and energetic Chávez rose through the ranks of CSO, eventually becoming its national director.<sup>5</sup>

Orendain joined CSO and became friends with Chávez. At CSO Orendain also met his wife Raquel, a dedicated woman who provided moral and intellectual support throughout his subsequent career as a labor organizer. They married in 1952 and both worked in the CSO from 1953 to 1962.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from Orendain's newly formed relationships, Chávez was also developing an ideology that would later be crucial to the farm workers' movement. As a devout Catholic, Chávez "expected the churches to minister to the poor and the needy," arguing they should be a "pillar of support" to his organization since both pursued similar objectives.<sup>7</sup> Also during these years Chávez began studying nonviolent protest as a form of civil disobedience. Although his mother had preached nonviolence since he was young, Chávez began studying the tactics of St. Paul and Mohandas Ghandi.<sup>8</sup> This would shape not only the farm workers' movement but would also be thrust into the disputes between Chávez and Orendain that developed later in the 1970s.

Since Orendain was a farm worker, he originally joined CSO to volunteer in the Oxnard, California anti-bracero program. The U.S. government developed the Bracero Program during World War II as a means to import cheap labor into the Southwest's

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<sup>5</sup> Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 3; Gómez-Quirón, *Mexican-American Labor*, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Raquel Orendain, interview by Martha Cortera, 23 May 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>7</sup> Gómez-Quirón, *Mexican-American Labor*, 244.

<sup>8</sup> César Chávez, "Cesar Chavez Speaks With Bob Fitch About La Causa, 1970," interview by Bob Fitch in, *Major Problems in Mexican-American History*, ed. Zaragoza Vargas (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 387-389; John C. Hammerback and Richard J. Jensen, *The Rhetorical Career of Cesar Chavez* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), 17-18.

agribusiness sector.<sup>9</sup> Chávez learned that growers in the Oxnard area were employing Mexican braceros instead of U.S. citizens, and accused them of using the program to increase their profits while perpetuating poverty among American workers. Through the CSO he pressured the Department of Labor to force the growers to hire local workers.<sup>10</sup> This was the first time both Chávez and Orendain had aroused the antagonism of wealthy growers.

After the Oxnard incident, CSO became more focused on the plight of California's farm workers. This comes as no surprise; like Orendain, as a farm worker Chávez had experienced firsthand the injustices growers committed.<sup>11</sup> In 1962 Orendain and Chávez lobbied California lawmakers in Sacramento for a minimum wage law and various other workplace improvements such as toilets, clean drinking water, and aid for needy children. While in the capitol building during the 1962 legislative session, one grower informed them that if the minimum wage passed he would simply move his farm to Central or South America. Orendain responded dryly:

It's alright with me if you go and farm in Mexico or any other South American country and develop a good industry out there; but please, when the governments there take over your interests, please don't try and send our people to fight for your interests out there.

Thus CSO's efforts were strongly opposed, and Orendain began losing faith in the democratic system. Also for the first time Orendain and Chávez understood the political

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<sup>9</sup> Craig J. Jenkins, *The Politics of Insurgency: The Farmworker Movement in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 133; Marion Beth Morris, "The History of the Mexican Contract Labor Program, 1942-1966" (M.A. thesis, North Texas State University, 1967), 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Eugene Nelson, *Huelga: The First Hundred Days of the Great Delano Grape Strike* (Delano: Farm Worker Press, 1966), 50.

<sup>11</sup> For more information see Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 45-93.

clout of the growers, learning they had successfully lobbied the California state legislature in opposition to CSO's proposal.<sup>12</sup>

Orendain's frustration at the organization's inability to accomplish its objectives grew. Moreover, he was frustrated at his own limited role in CSO's activities; as an illegal immigrant, he remained a peripheral contributor until his naturalization in 1959.<sup>13</sup> Still, concerning farm worker assistance the group had little to be excited about. They did receive some help from the "politically active Anglo middle class," but Orendain likened this to tokenism, claiming that politicians would use CSO "just to get elected:"

In the CSO we were trying to give voting power to the Mexican Americans. We were working real (sic) well, but when the doctors, lawyers, and the middle class got into it, they used us just for political power and to win elections. Therefore, by 1962 we had gotten completely away from the farm workers' problems, and so we got out of the CSO and formed the National Farm Workers' Association.

Chávez, realizing that CSO could not properly assist the farm workers, resigned first, and Orendain soon followed. Personally committed to assisting the poor farm workers, Chávez decided to form a farm labor union.<sup>14</sup>

In the summer of 1962, Chávez formed the National Farm Workers' Association (NFWA). Chávez worked feverishly to publicize the NFWA among workers, and on September 30, they held their first meeting in Fresno with about 150 delegates. Here leadership was solidified, and many of the important players in the subsequent farm workers' movement were elected to key leadership positions: Chávez was elected Director, Orendain Secretary-Treasurer, and Dolores Huerta and Gilberto Padilla Vice Presidents.

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<sup>12</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>13</sup> Orendain to McCreight, 14 November 1978, Folder 1, TFWUP-UT.

<sup>14</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

Huerta and Padilla, like Orendain, were both former CSO members and later became involved in the Río Grande Valley movement. Dues were set at \$3.50 per month. Thus the union was born and the first effective efforts to unionize farm workers were underway.<sup>15</sup>

The significance of this first meeting cannot be overstated. Elected to positions of leadership, both Chávez and Orendain solidified their standing among union members and farm workers. By this point the two were friends, but Chávez's respect for Orendain increased during the first year of the Delano grape strike. This later proved evident when Chávez sent Orendain to assist Eugene Nelson in the Río Grande Valley in 1966.<sup>16</sup> Also, Orendain's official status in the union implies a commitment to Chávez and his nonviolent philosophy. Chávez thought that only a nonviolent movement could win justice for the farm workers and most union members, including Orendain, agreed.<sup>17</sup> Despite the fact that people noticed Orendain's penchant for questioning authority and his "skeptical" personality,<sup>18</sup> there is no indication Orendain criticized Chávez's non-violence at this time. He and Chávez did have very different personalities – which Orendain's young daughter Melanie perceptively noticed were bound to conflict in the future – but since Orendain joined the union and held a key position, he was clearly committed to the cause. Orendain thus became a committed "*buelgista*" ("striker," or a participant in the farm workers' movement).

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<sup>15</sup> Antonio Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005; Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 174; also Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Matthiessen, *Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1969), 24-25, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 330; Stan Steiner, *La Raza: The Mexican Americans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 280.

Wisely, the ever-patient Chávez did not force the union to act too quickly. During its first few years, the NFWA served mainly as a credit union for the workers,<sup>19</sup> all the while spreading word of their future plans to struggle for the workers' rights. Indeed, the workers sorely needed assistance:

In California, their median annual wage was half the poverty level. Most migrant workers...worked ten-hour days for ten cents an hour. Living conditions were substandard; most...lived in barrios of large cities or in squalid conditions on farms. Growers kept shabby accommodations for field hands and local citizens wanted the migrants to work and then move on to another harvest since the community did not want to pay taxes to support additional schools and services. In California, the job accident rate was three times and infant mortality double the national average; life expectancy was under fifty, and since there were few controls then on farm pesticides and other chemicals, thousands of workers were poisoned. Furthermore, Hispanics received poor education...the average Hispanic finished eight [years of schooling] in California. Uneducated and poor, they had little hope for escaping poverty.<sup>20</sup>

Chávez was indeed aware of the enormity of the task before him.

For two and a half years the NFWA slowly built up support until its first official strike in the spring of 1965. In McFarland, California, rose grafters working for a company called Mount Arbor were promised \$9 dollars per thousand roses grafted but were actually receiving only \$6-7.50. When the union set up pickets, the company called the police and used strikebreakers from Mexico to break the picket lines. Despite the union's loss, Chávez later recalled that this event "gave us a good indication of what to expect in other strikes, how labor contractors and police would be used against us."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Melanie Orendain interview by the author, 18 January 2005; Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>20</sup> Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America From Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 301.

<sup>21</sup> Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 179-180.



With this first experience behind them, Orendain was thrilled the union was finally acting. They remained dormant until the fall, when on September 8 a Filipino farm workers' union, the Agricultural Workers' Organizing Committee (AWOC), went on strike against grape growers in the Delano area where the NFWA was headquartered.<sup>22</sup> Chávez was again reluctant to get involved, but the head of AWOC, Larry Itliong, implored him to do so. Some of the strikers had threatened to beat up strikebreakers, and Itliong knew that Chávez's pacifism and magnetic appeal could prevent this violence.<sup>23</sup> Chávez was thus finagled into participating, and thus the famous Delano grape strike began.

The strike garnered immediate reaction from local Catholic and Protestant clergy. The California Migrant Ministry, led by the reverend Christ Hartmire, gave emphatic support to the union. Two local Roman Catholic priests, Keith Kenney and Arnold Meagher, echoed Chávez's religious ideology, justifying church support by saying, "where the poor are, Christ should be." A *Time* article that covered the role of the church in the new strike presented the demonstrators as, "the poor calling out to heaven." Typical strikers were cited, such as "Manuel Rivera, 52 and father of seven, [who] works ten hours a day for \$1.25 an hour to feed his family, [and] says the 'vineyard owners make an animal out of me, they might as well put a leash on me.'"<sup>24</sup> Chávez's dream of the church assisting his struggle to help such impoverished workers was becoming reality.

Orendain's stance on church involvement with union activities was less enthusiastic. Being non-religious, it was well known that Orendain had a very cynical

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>23</sup> Florence M. White, *Cesar Chavez: Man of Courage* (Champaign: Gerrard Publishing Company, 1973), 59.

<sup>24</sup> "Grapes of Wrath," *Time*, 10 December 1965, 96.

outlook towards the church and that he “strongly opposed any use of religion in union activities.”<sup>25</sup> Chávez’s devout beliefs would later publicly come between him and Orendain. Nevertheless, at this time their relationship remained in good standing.

By the end of 1965 the strike became stronger. The union claimed over five thousand members, and various religious, student, and civil-rights groups were supporting their effort. Also, Walter Reuther, head of the United Auto Workers (UAW), pledged five thousand dollars a month until the strike was won. Despite this backing, NFWA efforts did not halt Delano’s massive grape harvest. Thus, the union turned to a new tactic – a nationwide boycott. Blacklisted were the largest grape growers from the Delano area: Schenley Industries, DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation, and eighty-three smaller vineyards.<sup>26</sup> The boycott remained an important tactic through the duration of the farm workers’ movement.

Orendain spent the latter weeks of 1965 traveling with Chávez throughout California to the union leader’s various speaking engagements, encouraging support for the boycott.<sup>27</sup> The union also began sending delegates to many of the major metropolitan areas across the country, and for that purpose in January 1966 Chávez and Orendain went to Chicago. Tracking the effectiveness of this trip is difficult, although it is known they had at least minimal success: in an amusing incident, a group of sympathetic Chicago housewives stripped a local supermarket of DiGiorgio canned goods and barricaded the aisles on

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<sup>25</sup> Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 277; Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard A. García, *Cesar Chavez: A Triumph of Spirit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 85.

<sup>26</sup> *Newsweek*, 27 December 1965, 57-58, 84.

<sup>27</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

which they had been displayed. Although perhaps not the type of enthusiasm Chávez and Orendain were hoping for, the tactic was affective – the store dropped all DiGiorgio brands en lieu of the boycott.

Also of note, Eugene Nelson, whom Chávez sent to organize the boycott in Houston, had previously represented the union in Chicago. Orendain could not explain why Nelson, whom he never really liked, wanted to leave Chicago.<sup>28</sup> Ironically, it would be less than a year before Orendain would meet Nelson again, as the two would work together during the coming struggle in the Río Grande Valley.

Orendain remained in Chicago from January until April 1966 while union activities in California heated up. In late March the union organized a 300-mile march from Delano to Sacramento to publicize the grape strike and boycott.<sup>29</sup> Orendain remained in Chicago during most of this pilgrimage, but flew back on April 6 to participate in the last three days.<sup>30</sup> The march ended on Easter Sunday with a rally at the state capitol, with a crowd of over 8,000 demanding an audience with California's Governor Edmund G. Brown. Although Brown refused to meet with them, the spirited rally ended with a speech by Chávez, announcing the nationwide boycott of DiGiorgio and other Delano grape growers, despite the fact that DiGiorgio had already proposed secret-ballot elections for its workers to determine union popularity.<sup>31</sup> The NFWA was quickly gaining the national spotlight.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.; "Chicago Supermarket Drops Cannery Brand in Wake of California Farm Strike," *Business Week*, 18 June 1966, 158.

<sup>29</sup> Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 206.

<sup>30</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence E. Davies, "Grape Growers Score Gov. Brown as March Ends," *New York Times*, 11 April 1966, 18; "Grape Strike Chief Accepts a Proposal for Secret Election," *New York Times*, 9 April 1966, 52.

Before the march ended, the NFWA scored a victory in Los Angeles. On April 6, 1966 Schenley Industries, along with various smaller vineyards, agreed to union contracts. The union also made plans to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO), a move that would bolster its bargaining power.<sup>32</sup> Encouraged by these events, Chávez and Orendain decided it was time to take action against the growers' use of "scab" labor.<sup>33</sup> In May, Orendain and Dolores Huerta went to El Paso to picket the Chamizal Labor Agency, which had been sending strikebreakers to DiGiorgio. Orendain remained there through June, successfully "turning around" many of the strikebreakers, some to other labor agencies and some back across the border into Mexico. After his victory in El Paso, Chávez ordered Orendain to the Río Grande Valley to assist Eugene Nelson in his fledgling effort to organize farm workers. Not wanting to travel all the way to Río Grande City, Orendain correctly argued that El Paso was actually closer to Delano than Río Grande City. He instead lingered a few more days in El Paso and finally returned to Delano later that summer.<sup>34</sup> Though unaware at the time, it was only a matter of months before Orendain would return to Texas, commencing his career as a Texas farm labor organizer.

By the end of the summer 1966, the national media recognized the NFWA as a powerful, effective, and militant labor union.<sup>35</sup> Despite their many successes, union officials knew a long, protracted struggle awaited them. In late August, opposition came from

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Bart, "Schenley to Bargain With a Grape Union," *New York Times*, 7 April 1966, 1, 28; Davies, "G.O.P. Rivals Split on Grape March," *New York Times*, 13 April 1966, 2.

<sup>33</sup> "Scab" was a derogatory term used by union members for Mexican nationals who were brought in to break strikes.

<sup>34</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA; Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 224-225.

<sup>35</sup> "The New Militancy of Labor," *Newsweek*, 26 September 1966, 93.

another, unexpected source – the Teamsters. On August 31 the Teamsters planned elections to determine their strength with farm workers in California. Fearing the elections would be fraudulent, Chávez knew he had to act preemptively. Therefore, on August 22 the NFWA merged with the AWOC to form the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee (UFWOC), AFL-CIO, although the union was not fully AFL-CIO affiliated until 1973.<sup>36</sup> All of the previous leaders of the NFWA retained their old positions, and Larry Itliong, AWOC leader, was added as a Vice President to the new union.<sup>37</sup> With the two unions combined, Chávez now had enough power to challenge the Teamsters for farm worker representation.

As strong as they had been before, by the fall of 1966 the union was even more powerful. They were the largest and most successful farm labor union in the history of the United States. Among their ranks were students, clergymen, civil rights activists, and the workers themselves. They enjoyed national media recognition, due in large part to Chávez's charisma and his visionary leadership. Although much travail lay ahead, the members of the UFWOC had much to be proud of.

It was at this time in late 1966 that Antonio Orendain emerged from under the shadow of César Chávez, and from this point the personal histories of the two men began to diverge. With all of the experience he had gained, Orendain was ready to step out on his own, and all he needed was the impetus to do so. The Starr County strike gave him that opportunity.

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<sup>36</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA; Tony Castro, *Chicano Power: The Emergence of Mexican America* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1974), 81.

<sup>37</sup> Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 239-242; Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CÉSAR CHÁVEZ OF TEXAS

On September 27, 1966, César Chávez sent his trusted lieutenant, Antonio Orendain, to Río Grande City, Texas to assist a fledgling strike against melon growers in the area.<sup>1</sup> Orendain's efforts for the following seven months demonstrated his commitment to *La Causa* ("the cause," referring to the farm workers' movement), and by the end of his involvement he was a bona fide farm labor organizer.

When he arrived in the Río Grande Valley of South Texas, what came to be known as the Starr County strike was in dire straits, and Orendain purposefully became the local strike administrator. The events preceding his arrival were the culmination of generations of poverty and extreme social stratification. In many ways, the conditions of the South Texas farm workers were much worse than the California farm workers, and thus in May 1966 the explosion of unrest in the Valley was no surprise. A brief examination of the events prior to Orendain's arrival illustrates the situation he faced in September 1966.

Prior to the strike, the exploitation of the farm workers in South Texas was well documented. In 1960 the population of Starr County was 17,137, and its median income was about \$1,700 per year. Seventy-one percent of the people earned less than \$3,000 annually, while only two and one-half percent earned more than \$10,000. Eighty-eight

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<sup>1</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

percent of the county was of Mexican decent.<sup>2</sup> One historian argued that the border counties – Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, Kennedy, Kleberg, and Duval – were the heart of the “semi-feudal patrón system that had its roots in the Spanish colonial system.”<sup>3</sup> Half of the mostly Mexican-American homes in the Valley had neither hot water nor plumbing. The average farm worker was a Mexican American who had only 6 years of schooling, and over ninety percent of the population had not finished high school.<sup>4</sup> Diseases such as typhoid, typhus, dysentery, and leprosy were common and the growers did little to assist the workers financially; by 1967, the average wage was \$1.16 per hour, which translated to about \$1400 per year.<sup>5</sup> These people were among the most impoverished and highly ostracized in the United States.

By 1963, others began noticing their plight. Roy Evans, Secretary-Treasurer of the Texas AFL-CIO, recognized the problem, labeling the farm workers the “largest group of unorganized” workers in the nation, but noted that – given a border completely open to immigrants – it would be nearly impossible to organize them.<sup>6</sup> Evans publicly denounced working and living conditions, blaming much of the problem on “green carders,” or Mexican nationals who received work visas to daily come into the country and work on the

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Carr Winn, “The Valley Farm Workers’ Movement, 1966-1967” (M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1970), 7; Carr Winn, “Mexican Americans in the Texas Labor Movement” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas Christian University, 1972), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel D. Arreola, *Tejano South Texas: A Mexican Cultural Province* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 190. *Patrones* were ranch owners who strictly controlled the lives of their peon workers.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Arnoldo de León, *Mexican Americans in Texas: A Brief History* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson Incorporated, 1999), 138; Carr Winn, “The Valley Farm Workers’ Movement,” 6.

<sup>6</sup> Clipping, “AFL-CIO Director Says South Texas People Exploited,” *Corpus Christi Caller*, 2 July 1963, Folder 1, Box 2, Mexican American Farm Workers’ Movement, Texas Labor Archives, University Library Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter MAFWM-UTA).

farms. He began coordinating efforts with Fidel Velásquez, a Senator in Mexico's congress who agreed that commuters perpetuated poverty in the border area, to end commuter work.<sup>7</sup> Evans called for demonstrations in South Texas if working conditions did not improve and this drew the ire of Governor John Connally, who accused him of "trying to flame racial issues in Texas."<sup>8</sup> The Texas establishment did not want social unrest in the Río Grande Valley.

Many recognized that unrest was approaching. An article in the *Houston Post* in 1963 predicted widespread unrest in the Valley, citing the poor wages, working conditions, and years of oppression as the impetus for the Valley's Mexican Americans to revolt. The workers were recognized as "the sleeping dragon" that would soon awaken if conditions remained unchanged.<sup>9</sup>

It would take three years for the "revolt" to begin. What the workers needed – other than sealing the border from immigration – was an enterprising leader to step in and channel their energy into an organized farm labor union. Chávez would have been ideal, but he was tied down with UFWOC activities in California's vast fields. Instead they got Eugene Nelson, who succeeded not only in starting the movement but also nearly running it into the ground.

Nelson had left Chicago in April of 1966 and arrived in Houston to help organize the grape boycott. While in Houston, he met with NFWA lawyer Chris Dixie, who is

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<sup>7</sup> Clipping, "AFL-CIO Threatens Valley," *Mid-City News Texan*, 17 July 1963; clipping, "Mexican Blasts Bracero Program," *Corpus Christi Times*, 12 July 1963, both in Folder 1, Box 2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>8</sup> Clipping, "Union Stirs Unrest: - Connally," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 18 July 1963, Folder 1, Box 2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>9</sup> Clipping, James O. Halley and O.D. Wilson, "South Texas, Valley, Sown With Revolt," *Houston Post*, 11 August 1963, 1, 4, Folder 1, Box 2, MAFWM-UTA.



credited with giving him the idea to organize workers in the Río Grande Valley. Nelson liked the idea and decided to act upon it, although he did so without the blessing of Chávez.<sup>10</sup> Thus the UFWOC was fated to embrace the Valley farm workers' movement unwillingly.

Two local men, Margil Sánchez and Lucio Galván, had already planned a small strike for the upcoming melon harvest, independent of Nelson and the NFWA. Nelson incorporated these two into his own plans and organizing efforts began.<sup>11</sup> By late May 1966 the group formed the Independent Workers' Association (IWA), with their principal office in the small town of Mission, Texas. Initially, the union campaigned for a \$1.25 minimum wage and an 8-hour workday to replace the common rate of .40 cents per hour and a 14-hour workday. They immediately signed up about 200 workers for a \$1 per person membership fee. Things were going so well that Nelson was quoted in a local newspaper, saying "there has been no hostile reaction whatever" to his or the union's presence in the Valley.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from Nelson's obvious un-preparedness for the struggle ahead, his next mistake was striking after less than two weeks of organizing. Why he was so eager to strike is unknown – in California Chávez spent three years organizing and preparing the NFWA for its strike, and when the time came he still felt the union was unprepared. Perhaps Nelson thought the strike would be easy since the grape strike and boycott had been

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<sup>10</sup> Carr Winn, "The Valley Farm Workers' Movement, 1966-1967," 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 33.

<sup>12</sup> Clipping, "Valley Farm Union Pushed," *Corpus Christi Caller*, 23 May 1966; clipping, "Mission-Based Drive Opens to Organize Farm Workers," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 23 May 1966; clipping, Gail Sammons, "Ag Labor Movement Headquarters Here," *Mission Times*, 26 May 1966, all in Folder 5, Box 3, MAFWM-UTA.

relatively successful in California. Nevertheless, he clearly underestimated the backlash of Texas conservatism and anti-unionism, particularly in the wealthy agricultural areas of South Texas.

Nelson led the IWA, whose ranks had swelled to over 500 members, in a strike against local melon growers on June 1, 1966. The IWA struck such agri-business giants as La Casita, Los Puertos Plantation, and Sun-Tex Farms. Supported by the Produce Packers Local 78b of Río Grande City, union men walked off the job and began picketing local growers.<sup>13</sup> However, the next day the growers struck back: a local judge issued a 10-day restraining order on picketing in Starr County, which allowed the melon harvest to resume.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the union was forced to remain inactive in Starr County until June 12.

Activities continued elsewhere as the union held rallies, marches, and strikes in other parts of the Valley. Dolores Huerta flew in and participated in a five-mile march from Río Grande City to Garciasville on June 7. A Teamsters' official from San Antonio also participated in the march, and rumors circulated that the union would affiliate with the Teamsters, not the NFWA. To avoid this, Nelson called for an election the following day. On June 8 the IWA voted overwhelmingly to affiliate with Chávez's union and thus officially became Local 2 of the NFWA.<sup>15</sup> This was important, because without this affiliation Orendain would not likely have been sent to the Río Grande Valley in September 1966.

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<sup>13</sup> Carr Winn, "The Valley Farm Workers' Movement, 1966-1967," 24; clipping, "Packers Picketing Valley Melon Men," *San Angelo Morning Standard Times*, 2 June 1966, Folder 5, Box 3, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>14</sup> Clipping, "Melon Pickers Back in the Fields," *Dallas Times-Herald*, 3 June 1966, Folder 5, Box 3, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>15</sup> Carr Winn, "The Valley Farm Workers' Movement, 1966-1967," 29-30.

Spirits must have been high, especially for Nelson, whose fledgling union now had the backing of a much stronger organization. However, local opposition continued. On June 10, a county official gave orders to local law enforcement to use county equipment “to spray insecticide on a group of workers in an attempt to break up a meeting.”<sup>16</sup> This sordid opposition polarized the two sides even further and caused union members to increasingly resent the conspicuous grower-bureaucratic alliance. On June 12, a prophetic article appeared in the *Houston Post* warning that if the situation did not improve the strike could possibly “develop into a full-scale social revolution.”<sup>17</sup>

The situation looked bleak for Nelson. He had organized a union, signed up hundreds of workers, but was strongly opposed by the growers. Justice for the workers was becoming a fleeting hope. To publicize the plight of the Valley farm workers, the union planned a 380-mile march from Río Grande City to Austin, hoping to garner attention from Governor Connally. Similar to the NFWA march in California earlier that spring, this march, which began on July 11, brought national attention to the Starr County strike, illustrating all of the main issues including the union’s involvement with Catholic leaders in Texas. Although Connally and other high state officials met the marchers on a highway outside of New Braunfels and scorned them, the marchers continued and arrived in Austin on September 7, holding a rally on the steps of the state capitol. They did not achieve concrete objectives, but noting the unity of the Mexican-American farm workers and the

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<sup>16</sup> Clipping, “Nazi-Like Deed in Valley Charged,” *San Antonio Express-News*, 11 June 1966, Folder 5, Box 3, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>17</sup> Clipping, Bill Durham, “Farmhands on Brink of Revolt,” *Houston Post*, 12 June 1966, Folder 5, Box 3, MAFWM-UTA.

support of some of the Texas clergy, many considered the march a success.<sup>18</sup> Hopes were high, and the “sleeping dragon” had awakened.

It was into this optimism that Antonio Orendain was sent. Chávez – who had been in Austin on September 7 and thought Local 2 was poorly organized – knew he had to do something to salvage the movement in Texas, and thus sent his trusted lieutenant to administer the strike. Despite the successes of the march to Austin, Chávez did not think Nelson was capable of the Herculean goals of Local 2 – a minimum wage law and better working conditions, in a state where the odds were completely against them. Also, Nelson was an Anglo in a situation where someone of Mexican ethnicity would be a better fit. A new organizer with new tactics was necessary.

Orendain arrived on September 27 and soon took over all union activities,<sup>19</sup> immediately making a distinct impression. One author noted Orendain was “a handsome Mexican with luminous brown eyes and a bold mustachio; he dresses with flair and speaks laconically.”<sup>20</sup> Aside from dressing with flair, this description contrasts sharply with Chávez, whose Mexican heritage and reticent nature were part of his allure to the workers.

Not everyone was happy to see Orendain. When he arrived in Río Grande City (headquarters had earlier been relocated there from Mission), there was immediate tension between him and Nelson. Nelson disliked the idea of Orendain taking over, claiming he wanted assistance but not to lose his position as chief organizer. However, Orendain later recalled giving both Nelson and Bill Chandler, another UFWOC representative, the

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<sup>18</sup> Carr Winn, “The Valley Farm Workers’ Movement, 1966-1967,” 43, 47; *Newsweek*, 12 September 1966, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA; De León, *Mexican Americans in Texas*, 138.

<sup>20</sup> Matthiessen, *Sal Si Puedes*, 119-120.

opportunity to serve as “the César Chávez of Texas,” and both flatly refused. Thus, Orendain claimed he reluctantly became union leader in Texas in early October (his tentativeness was due to his poor English-speaking skills). Nevertheless, friction between Orendain and Nelson was immediately evident and remained through the duration of the movement. Both knew that because of the state’s anti-labor laws and open border the strike would probably fail, but from the start Orendain thought Nelson had a poor attitude.<sup>21</sup> His relegation to a secondary status must have bruised Nelson’s ego, but to Chávez the demotion probably made sense: Nelson had little experience organizing farm workers,<sup>22</sup> had acted hastily and without his supervision, and was losing the battle against the growers. The UFWOC could not afford a grower’s victory anywhere, and thus it was drawn, however reluctantly, into the bleak struggle in South Texas.<sup>23</sup>

Since the strike had become highly publicized after the march to Austin, Orendain claimed the middle-class tokenism of the California movement was recreating itself in Texas. During the protest in Austin, many labor leaders had championed the \$1.25 minimum wage, but Orendain discovered that “after the lights and the TV were off, all the good labor leaders and people disappeared.”<sup>24</sup> What he perceived to be tokenism – most labor leaders had little reason to be enthusiastic when a large pool of strikebreakers was

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<sup>21</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>22</sup> Nelson had served as a picket captain for Chávez during the early part of the Delano strike. For more information see, Carr Winn, “The Valley Farm Workers’ Movement, 1966-1967,” 20.

<sup>23</sup> Many sources indicate Chávez had no designs on organizing in South Texas. For example, see, Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization*, 33; also, César Chávez, “The Organizers Tale,” in *Mexican Workers in the United States: Historical and Political Perspectives*, eds. George C. Kiser and Martha Woody Kiser (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 57-62.

<sup>24</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

available across the border – was an issue Orendain would continuously confront during his subsequent career in Texas.

Orendain also disliked the issue of a farm worker minimum wage. In his mind, a \$1.25 an hour minimum wage was not sufficient to alleviate the farm workers' plight. To improve their situation Orendain thought the entire "system" had to change, and thus argued the movement should instead focus on collective bargaining recognition, as this was a more plausible tool to improve working and living conditions generally. Thus, from this point forward Texas farm workers championed collective bargaining as their main cause, not a minimum wage.<sup>25</sup>

Another thing Orendain considered problematic was the behavior of union members. Upon arrival he noticed a general lack of enthusiasm by most members. Fundraisers behaved lackadaisically, and strikers seemed apathetic. After arriving in Río Grande City Orendain personally witnessed some union members chatting and laughing with strikebreakers while picketing. This was a far cry from Delano, where "scabs" were considered of low moral character. To combat this apathy Orendain organized a demonstration in Río Grande City on October 8, 1966 to show the public the seriousness of the union. His impact on the area was thus felt immediately.<sup>26</sup>

After the October 8 rally, Orendain planned another rally for October 14 outside of the Starr County courthouse, where he was to give a speech to introduce himself and explain what the union was now fighting for. However, to the chagrin of union members

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Orendain was forced to cancel the event. The cancellation made the front page of a local newspaper, indicating an innate local hostility toward the cause.<sup>27</sup>

A few days later, Bill Chandler was arrested on trumped-up charges, the first of many arrests during Orendain's tenure in the Valley. During a demonstration on a highway outside of Río Grande City on October 12, a group of policemen began shouting in Spanish at some of the strikers. Chandler, who had not been picketing, stepped in to defend them, and the officers subsequently accused him of using foul language in Spanish (ironically, Chandler spoke no Spanish). As Orendain witnessed the event, the police arrested Chandler and took him to the jail at the county courthouse. Orendain followed to inquire of the charges and whether he could post bond. An officer at the courthouse told Orendain the charges were "disturbing the peace," and proceeded to threaten him with arrest if he did not vacate the premises. Chandler spent the night in jail and was released the next day on \$500 bond.<sup>28</sup>

This was the first of many frustrating encounters Orendain had with local law enforcement. Arrests would prove a big problem for Local 2, not only because the charges were usually exaggerated but also because bonds were excessively high. As Secretary-Treasurer of the UFWOC, Orendain was aware of the impact excessive bond payments had on the union's budget. Perhaps local officials were also aware of this, and pursued it as a tactic to vanquish the troublesome union.

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<sup>27</sup> Clipping, "Starr Farm Meet Cancelled," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 14 October 1966, front page, Book 3, Part 1, Box 10a, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>28</sup> "Statement of Arrest, and Handling Thereof, of William L. Chandler, Jr. at U.S. Highway 83 West of 'Rio Grande City,' Starr County, Texas, Oct. 12 1966," Folder 3, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA; clipping, "Farm Union Official Arrested by Deputies," *Rio Grande Herald*, 20 October 1966, Book 3, Part 1, Box 10a, MAFWM-UTA.

On October 21, 1966 a manager at La Casita, one of the largest farms in the area and the focal point of union activity, publicly stated that he had over 450 Mexican workers that were completely satisfied with their jobs. If they were commuters this might have been true – the meager wages paid on Texas farms were much better than wages in Mexico – but the statement was likely false. Assuming the manager was speaking of commuters, Orendain called the local press, saying “I’m going to prove to you where he got all his good, happy workers.” Orendain subsequently led a group of *huelgistas* to the international bridge at Roma on October 24 to forcibly prevent the importation of Mexican nationals.<sup>29</sup> It was here that Orendain received his first chance to publicly demonstrate himself as a *huelgista*.

At five a.m. Orendain, Nelson, Chandler, and fourteen others paid the ten-cent crossing fee and entered the bridge at Roma. Orendain originally thought the group would just “play it by ear” and that American authorities would “arrest us right away.” When no arrests were made, he decided to block all of the traffic crossing from the Mexican side. After stopping a few large trucks, Orendain succeeded in creating a traffic jam. With the bridge full of heavy trucks – some pulling flatbeds loaded with bricks – an employee from the American side warned him that the bridge resisted only so much weight and could possibly collapse if some of the trucks were not allowed through. The employee threatened Orendain, saying if this happened “you will have to pay.” Orendain sarcastically replied he would pay the entire cost of the bridge if it collapsed.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



However, after considering the consequences and negative press if such a catastrophe occurred, Orendain decided to let the trucks go, and only stop strikebreakers trying to cross into Texas. Local law enforcement from the Texas side soon arrived, so Orendain and the rest of the *huelgistas* moved immediately to the international line and stood on it, confounding the officers. Not knowing what to do, the officers left the group alone, and for the next several hours they succeeded in turning back many strikebreakers trying to cross.

Later in the morning the officers began arresting the demonstrators, so Orendain, Chandler, and Nelson immediately ran to the Mexican side of the bridge. After the American authorities told them they had called the Mexican police who were en route, Orendain advised the group to go back to the American side, arguing they would have no civil rights in a Mexican prison. Returning to the international line, he, Nelson and Chandler put one foot on the American side and the other on the Mexican side.<sup>31</sup>

At this point the authorities had enough. According to Orendain, a few of them knocked Nelson down, “and they got him by the hand and were just dragging him along like a rag” about fifty feet to where the squad cars were parked. County attorney Randall Nye was present, and after telling Orendain that Nelson was guilty of resisting arrest, Orendain replied, “I don’t see [him] resisting arrest, and I don’t approve of you arresting him in that manner using too much force.”

In protest, Orendain lay down in the middle of the bridge and continued blocking traffic. Soon the rest of the strikers, about 16 persons in all, joined him, and Orendain told

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

the group to lock arms “so it will be harder to arrest us.” Nye then came over and tried to talk some of the protestors away from the bridge, saying that these “outside agitators (Orendain, Nelson, and Chandler) were causing too many problems.” None were lured away, and to frustrate Nye, Orendain instructed the group to begin singing loudly, leading them in Mexican songs such as “*Solidaridad*” (Solidarity) and “*Nosotros Venceremos*” (We Shall Overcome), so no one would be able to hear him.<sup>32</sup>

After tolerating this for a short while, authorities finally decided to take the “outside agitators” away. According to Orendain, “two police put me in an armlock” and started pulling him, while his wrists bled as handcuffs dug into his skin. Fearing his arm would break, he told the officers to let go, which they did. As they dragged him to the police cars that were about twenty yards away, Orendain started shouting, “*viva la huelga!*” (Long live the strike), and the group responded and began singing again. “I left those guys with a real good spirit,” Orendain later recalled. Chandler would be dragged off in the same manner, and a few hours later the crowd was dispersed.<sup>33</sup>

They spent the next few hours in jail, eventually joined by the rest of the *huelgistas*, except for two women who remained at the bridge. Orendain demanded the group be provided a lawyer but county officials refused. They were eventually released, with no charges being filed.<sup>34</sup> The men had no lawyers and no money with which to pay their bail, so county officials realized they were wasting their time.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

The incident at the Roma Bridge was big news in the Valley and in Río Grande City, where it made the front page of the local newspaper.<sup>35</sup> The ensuing brouhaha was important because local residents and growers knew the strike had become more serious; aside from the march to Austin, the union had never so forcefully resisted the will of the growers or the authorities. More importantly than the show of solidarity, because of the impact of the incident Orendain was permanently recognized as a major player in the local movement. The day after the “lay-in,” Orendain complained to the local press about the rough treatment he and the other union members received from the authorities, and announced that for a short time the union would maintain minimal picketing along the highways and would not return to the bridge. However, he vowed there would be more demonstrations, such as a Halloween gathering at the Roma courthouse where union members would dress up as “rebels or Indians.”<sup>36</sup>

For the next few days Orendain took advantage of the media’s increased interest in the strike. A reporter for the *Houston Post* interviewed him concerning the bridge incident, during which Orendain reiterated that the motivation for the incident was to counteract the growers’ use of “commuters.” He claimed 100 to 150 commuters crossed the bridge at Roma every day, and the union was simply trying to deter this practice, which was unfair to local workers and drove wages down. Vowing to continue their focus on protesting commuter laborers, Orendain also said the union was going to “intensify its efforts” in

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<sup>35</sup> Clipping, “Farm Union Pickets are Arrested at Roma for Halting Bridge Traffic,” *Valley Morning Star*, 25 October 1966, 1, 3, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>36</sup> “Starr Quiet after ‘Lay-In,’” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 25 October 1966, 1, 3, Book 3, Part 1, Box 10a, MAFWM-UTA.

December with the intention of stopping the upcoming melon harvest.<sup>37</sup> Starr County was in for more trouble from the “outside agitators.”

At 5 a.m. on Halloween day 1966 Orendain drove across the bridge into Mexico to “meet with Mexican nationals on their own turf and talk to them about the movement.” He drove to nearby Ciudad Miguel Alemán and met two Mexican workers, Gilbert Campos and Marshall Méndez, who claimed to have witnessed the strike firsthand and sympathized with the movement.<sup>38</sup> The three then returned to the bridge at 6 a.m. and were confronted by Mexican police. The police claimed Orendain was the last person to cross and accused him of breaking the locks and shutting the international gates behind him. Orendain of course denied this and a heated exchange followed. The Mexican police admitted that Texas Rangers had instructed them to arrest Orendain and accuse him of trying to tamper with U.S.-Mexican relations. Upon hearing this Orendain sarcastically jibed, “I heard Mexico is independent,” implying the police were pawns of American authorities. Recognizing his stubbornness the police arrested Orendain and his two companions. The three were held in a Ciudad Miguel Alemán prison until they were finally released around 4 p.m. Mexican authorities warned them that the American police were waiting on the other side to take them into custody. Not wanting to go from one prison to another, Orendain traveled fifteen miles northeast to Guerrero, a small Mexican town, and crossed the border there.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Clipping, Cleveland Grammer, “Union Protests Green Cards,” *Houston Post*, 30 October 1966, 10, section 2, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>38</sup> “Farm Union Sympathizers Jailed by Mexican Police,” Folder 7, Box 6a, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>39</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

After returning to union headquarters in Río Grande City, the union denied Orendain had any involvement in the bridge-closing incident. Instead, they pinned the guilt on Campos and Méndez, saying they had perpetrated the crime as a “Halloween prank and protest,” and only out of support for the strike.<sup>40</sup> Orendain was innocent of any wrongdoing, but the event provides several insights into what the union was up against. After the “lay-in” authorities were watching Orendain and any event perpetrated on the union’s behalf was likely to be blamed on him, Nelson, or Chandler, who were continuously labeled the “three outside agitators.” Also, that the Texas Rangers finagled Mexican authorities into doing their will indicates the “legal reach” of Valley authorities. They had only speculative reason to believe Orendain had closed the bridge, as he had been arrested with no evidence of his guilt. False accusations such as these were becoming common as the strike wore on.

An event occurred on the night of November 3 that successfully made Local 2 infamous. At about 5 p.m. in Río Grande City, Orendain placed four picketers in the “right of way” of a train, due to carry five carloads of peppers that were picked and packed in a shed by strikebreakers. When the train was ready to leave, he and Chandler approached the engineer and asked if he would respect their picket line. At first reluctant, the engineer eventually consented after hearing the workers were fellow AFL-CIO unionists, and the train was halted.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Clipping, “Farm Union Sympathizers Jailed by Mexican Police;” clipping, “Union Blames ‘Halloween Prank’ for Jailing of Trio in Mexico,” both in *Valley Evening Monitor*, 1 November 1966, Book 3, Part 1, Box 10a, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>41</sup> Clipping, Gary Garrison, “Valley Rail Trestle Destroyed by Fire,” *Corpus Christi Caller*, 11 November 1966, 1, 14, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

Local authorities arrived, and upon inspection surmised that the picket lines were in accordance with Texas law and nothing could be done. A few hours later, a contingent of Texas Rangers arrived from Corpus Christi (this was the first of many encounters for Orendain with the Rangers). Orendain later recalled there were about two wagonloads of Rangers, who were brandishing machine guns and semiautomatic weapons. The Rangers successfully got the train moving, but it did not get far because a rail trestle near the picketers suddenly went up in flames, hemming the train in. The union denied starting the blaze, but blame was pinned on them immediately. A reporter who was on the scene approached Orendain, saying, “Randall Nye knows who burned the bridge. He knows every one of you guys burned the bridge, and after the election (for district attorney in early November), he is going to put in jail every one of you guys who burned the bridge.” Orendain simply replied “fine,” but later ruminated, “I don’t see why he had to wait until after the election. Why didn’t he do it right away, since everybody’s blaming it on us? We can see exactly who burned it.”<sup>42</sup> He was clearly implying that the union had been framed.

Orendain publicly exonerated the union, saying, “we don’t have to do things like that [burn rail trestles] because the railroads respect our pickets.” Clearly this was an inopportune time for the union to receive bad publicity, but unfortunately this was not the only issue they were facing – union funds had become dangerously low. To alleviate this, Nelson had gone to Houston on a fund-raising trip. The union had daily been feeding anywhere from 60 to 100 picketers, and Orendain claimed they could no longer do so. “We

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<sup>42</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

are advising our workers not to break the strike and work here but to move out, and work somewhere else,”<sup>43</sup> which would hopefully address the issue of diminishing funds.

Aside from financial difficulties, the union faced a public backlash concerning the fire. Local citizens harassed them, cutting the telephone lines and scratching obscenities on the door of union headquarters.<sup>44</sup> The trestle was part of the only railway leading out of Río Grande City, so all rail service was delayed until a new one could be built. Orendain had become infamous, and growers warned their workers to avoid him at all costs. On November 7, Ray Rochester, Vice President of La Casita, fired two workers simply because he saw them talking to Orendain during a picket. Things were spiraling out of control for the union, which still proclaimed its innocence regarding the bridge fire. “Someone did this to make us look bad and turn the public against us,” Bill Chandler said.<sup>45</sup> If so, the tactic seemed to be working.

Nye made good on his earlier promise and on November 7 began arresting union members for burning the bridge. While driving in Río Grande City, Orendain was pulled over by Ranger captain A.Y. Allee and a few others. When they told him he was under arrest, Orendain demanded to see a warrant, whereupon Allee told him one was not needed. Before placing handcuffs on him, one of the Rangers asked if he had any weapons, and Orendain replied that he did have a small knife. Upon hearing this news the startled

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<sup>43</sup> Clipping, Sam Gerald, “Wave of Violence, Fear, Sparked by Starr Bridge Fire,” *Valley Morning Star*, 5 November 1966, 1-2, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>44</sup> Clipping, “Rail Service Still Halted,” 6 November 1966, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>45</sup> Clipping, “Rio Grande City Terrorism Charged,” *San Antonio Express*, 8 November 1966, 1-C, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

Rangers jumped back, while a laughing Orendain handed over his one-inch pocketknife. The intentions of this dangerous “outside agitator” were sorely overestimated.

After arriving at the courthouse in downtown Río Grande City, Orendain was amazed when the judge and Rangers typed his arrest warrant right in front of him. The judge next asked Orendain if he was guilty of the charges, but Orendain refused to answer, saying he wanted to see a lawyer. When the judge refused him access to an attorney, the uncooperative Orendain was taken to a jail cell on the third floor.

Eventually other union members began pouring in, including Bill Chandler, until about 15 strikers filled the same cramped cell. All were held on charges of secondary picketing and suspicion of burning the rail trestle. Orendain was furious and asked one of the officers why they were being held. The officer admitted, “the Texas Rangers told us to put you in jail, and I don’t know anything.” When Orendain continued to argue, the officer replied, “you son-of-a-bitch, you’re acting real [sic] smart,” and threatened to enter the cell and kick him. Orendain continued to bait the officer, who had to be restrained from without.

Threatened beatings were not the only corrupt activities at the jailhouse. One officer tried to bribe a fifteen year old, Guillermo de la Cruz, who was jailed with the men, saying they would release him and give him \$1500 if he would say he saw the man with the black hat and black mustache (Orendain) near the bridge just before it burned. The boy steadfastly refused, even mocking the officers and blaming them for the fire.<sup>46</sup>

Witnessing such blatant corruption, Orendain and the others knew the law was against them. To protest their treatment, Orendain led the men in a six-day “*huelga de*

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<sup>46</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.



*hambre*” (hunger strike), which some non-jailed union members also joined. Making a decision that exemplified Orendain’s commitment to Chávez’s non-violent philosophy, Orendain and a few others refused food while union members held a vigil outside of the courthouse. After hearing about the hunger strike, a Dallas attorney represented the men pro-bono to ensure no civil liberties were violated. All were released on bond after ten days, as county officials realized they had no evidence against the men. Orendain, referring to the incident later, stated, “they didn’t treat us bad” – clearly trying to establish the moral high ground for him and the other jailed men.<sup>47</sup>

It is striking how Orendain was emulating César Chávez. He passively submitted to arrest and faced down corruption and violence by leading his men in a nonviolent hunger strike, shorter in length but similar to Chávez’s later fasts. He also had the complete support of the *huelgistas*, and like Chávez had a charisma that appealed to farm workers. However, the most important issue was whether the union actually burned the bridge. No one would ever be formally charged in the incident and a lawsuit brought by the Missouri-Pacific railroad against the union in 1967<sup>48</sup> would also prove unsuccessful. Therefore, one can only speculate. The union certainly had more to gain when the trestle burned, as this halted the flow of “scab” goods out of Río Grande City for several days. Presumably, had he known it was going to happen Orendain would have tried to stop it, considering his commitment to nonviolence and his denials of any wrongdoing since the fire. Perhaps the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid; clipping, “Jailed Union Men Urging Hunger Strike,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 18 November 1966; clipping, “10 Valley Organizers Released on Bond,” *Houston Chronicle*, 16 November 1966; clipping, “Hunger Strike Ends After Bond Posted for 10 Jailed Union Men,” November 1966, all in Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>48</sup> “Summons for Francisco Medrano to Appear in the Missouri Pacific Railroad Company vs. UFWOC on June 8, 1967 at the Courthouse in Rio Grande City,” Folder 15, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

arsonist was a misguided unionist who acted on his or her own accord. It seems unlikely that someone with grower sympathies was the perpetrator. Since the trestle was the only way to transport goods by rail out of the city, growers stood to lose money. However, based on the activities of local law enforcement during the 10-day jailing, corrupt county officials may have perpetrated the crime, solely to blame it on the hated Orendain and his union. The answer may never be known and, because the case was never solved, a remonstrance of Orendain as something other than “the César Chávez of Texas” is not called for.

A few days after the bridge-burning arrests were made, Chávez made his first public statement concerning the strike. He sounded much more optimistic than his lieutenant, who from the beginning knew there was little hope for success:

I would call the strike in the Rio Grande Valley a success. [However,] a lot depends on what you mean by success. For instance, the fact that the farm workers are on strike, but haven’t been able to put an ounce of economic stress on the growers, I consider this success – success in the terms that the people are determined in their fight. I think they will find a way to win.<sup>49</sup>

As shown by his later tentativeness regarding UFWOC activities in the Valley, Chávez knew the difficulties the union would have organizing workers. Thus, this statement was a public show of optimism, nothing more. Also notable is his use of the words “their” and “they,” instead of “our” and “us.” Chávez clearly felt he had no personal stake in the Valley – an issue that would eventually come between him and Orendain.

Immediately following his release Orendain was picked up again and questioned about the bridge burning, but claimed the authorities were “very polite about it.” He also

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<sup>49</sup> Clipping, E.B. Duarte, “Valley Strike Success,” *Alamo Messenger*, 10 November 1966, 2, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

recognized that public opinion had grown steadily anti-union since the incident, and it was rumored that a sheriff's deputy offered residents near where the fire occurred \$100 if they would blame it on the union.<sup>50</sup> Picketing was also sparse for the next few days: two picket lines, one at a parking lot near the Roma Bridge and another at Starr Produce, were both stopped by the Texas Rangers. Orendain canceled all picketing until the union could consult with a lawyer to establish the legality of future picketing and protest tactics.<sup>51</sup>

After the fire, the role of Rangers became more prominent. Orendain said that the Rangers at the Roma Bridge parking lot ordered picketers away "on the grounds they were violating a court imposed injunction against obstructing bridge traffic," a charge that Orendain claimed absurd, considering the parking lot was out of the bridge's right-of-way. "The Rangers are trying to enforce the law the way they want," he said; "each one interprets the law his own way."<sup>52</sup> The law would later vindicate the union against the Rangers, but at the time, the antipathy of the Rangers was frustrating for Orendain.

Orendain decided to pursue other activities in late November 1966 to bolster the union. On November 27 a rally with about 200 participants was held in front of the Río Grande City courthouse. Orendain gave a speech at the event, but more importantly, ten tons of food donations were gathered and about \$1200 dollars was added to the union's treasury. A "food caravan" organized by strike sympathizers that left Austin on November 24 made all of this charity possible. After Nelson gave a speech in the state capital, the

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<sup>50</sup> Clipping, "Starr County Asks Rangers to Stay On," *Valley Morning Star*, 18 November 1966, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>51</sup> Clipping, "Three Sealed Indictments Pose Mystery," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 18 November 1966, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>52</sup> Clipping, "Behind Scenes Maneuvering on 3 Starr Indictments Continues," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 20 November 1966, Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

Valley Farm Workers' Assistance Committee put the caravan together. About sixty-five cars and four trucks made the 400-mile trip from Austin to Río Grande City, gathering donations along the way.<sup>53</sup> Since Local 2's purse had been so restricted and Orendain admitted they were having trouble feeding workers, this assistance could not have come at a better time.

Orendain realized the assistance of people outside the Valley could prove invaluable, so on the last Sunday in November he and Bill Chandler held a workshop for some of the caravan members entitled, "How to Picket a Train." Contending that their activities on November 3 had been legal, Orendain spoke at the event, explaining what the picketers did and how the activities were in accordance with state law.<sup>54</sup> His ingenuity in hosting the event speaks for a personal creativity he possessed during difficult times. With picketing activities restricted by the Ranger's narrow interpretation of the law, Orendain found other ways for the union to continue functioning. This aspect of Orendain's talent as a labor leader would prove specifically important after the Starr County strike, during the long period between its end and the formation of the Texas Farm Workers' union in 1975.

On December 3 a group of about fifty led by Orendain and Chandler left for Del Río, hoping to gain an audience with President Johnson. They wanted Johnson, who was in Del Río to meet with Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, to witness a "peaceful appeal and demonstration so that he may become familiar with the plight of the farm

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<sup>53</sup> Clipping, Nolene Hodges, "Pressure on Legislature Promised," *Harlingen Valley Star*, 28 November 1966, 1-2; clipping, "Food, Clothes, Go to Valley Workers," *Corpus Christi Times*, 28 November 1966, both in Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA; clipping, "Thanksgiving Caravan for 'La Huelga,'" Folder 4, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>54</sup> Clipping, "Starr Farm Union Plans Sunday Workshop on 'How to Picket a Train,'" Folder 4, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

laborer here and elsewhere.”<sup>55</sup> Unable to gain an audience with Johnson, they returned to Río Grande City where on December 6, Orendain, Marshall Méndez, and Gilbert Campos were arrested for the Halloween incident on the Roma Bridge. Orendain surrendered voluntarily at union headquarters, as he was arrested per an indictment returned on November 16 by the 79<sup>th</sup> District Court grand jury that had been investigating this and other “union incidents.” Orendain continued proclaiming his innocence, saying, “I had nothing to do with the closing of the bridge.” Bond had originally been set at \$1,000 but was lowered to \$200. A local man, Nasario Treviño, paid it and Orendain was released.<sup>56</sup>

After the arrest the feuding between the union and law enforcement worsened. Randall Nye, who the union now recognized as a “grower attorney,” began slandering them, saying they started the bridge fire “and were a bunch of outsiders, liars, and ex-criminals.” A spokesperson from the UFWOC’s newspaper *El Malcriado* defended Local 2, saying the “strikers in Texas have faced police-state tactics by the Texas Rangers” and that “opposition to the strikers in Texas is even more ignorant and brutal than in California.” Nye claimed the bridge fire was “very opportune for the union,” while Orendain retorted that the union “must be ready to suffer in order to bring justice to this valley.”<sup>57</sup> Again taking the moral high ground, Orendain was invoking the peaceful philosophy of Chávez, willing to suffer and wait for justice for the Valley’s farm workers.

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<sup>55</sup> Clipping, “Union Headquarters Deserted Saturday,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 4 December 1966, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>56</sup> Clipping, “Farm Worker Union Officer is Arrested,” *Houston Chronicle*, 7 December 1966; clipping, “One Down, Two to Go on Starr Indictments,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 7 December 1966, 1,3, both in Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA; clipping, “Farm Union Officer is Arrested, Makes Bond,” *San Antonio Express*, 7 December 1966, 8-F, Book 3, Part 1, Box 10a, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>57</sup> “Orendain Jailed for ‘Locking a Gate,’” *El Malcriado*, Number 51, Newspaper Collection, University Library Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter NC-UTA).

The day after his release, Orendain wanted to do something to publicize the movement and counteract negative press coverage. He alerted the local media that the union was “planning to do something tomorrow but we can’t yet say what it will be.”<sup>58</sup> The next day, he and a few others went to the Roma Bridge to speak to Mexican commuters who worked daily at La Casita. His plan was to board the workers’ bus and convince them to stay and not break a picket line the union had planned for that day outside of the farm. However, the bus never showed up. “I’m pretty sure La Casita heard of what we were doing and didn’t send the bus,” Orendain ruminated. La Casita officials replied that the bus did not come because they simply did not have any work to be done that day.<sup>59</sup>

With his plan thwarted, Orendain was frustrated, as with the continuing arrests and negative press the union simply was not making any progress. However, the situation was indicative of the larger problem of commuter labor. Orendain knew that to defeat the growers they had to curtail the importation of commuter workers. A study by the Department of Labor reveals why the growers were so eager for commuters. In November 1966, the average farm worker in the Río Grande Valley made about .75 cents per hour, but the average farm worker in all of Texas made about .97 cents per hour. Clearly, the “green carders” were working for less, indicating that “a wage that in the U.S. is substandard is much more adequate than what the worker would get in Mexico.” Thus, for the growers there was little need to raise wages because there was “such a hoard of workers willing to work at a substandard level.” In places such as the Brownsville-Harlingen-San

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<sup>58</sup> Clipping, “Union Plans New Bid for Attention,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 8 December 1966, Book 3, Part 1, Box 10a, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>59</sup> Clipping, “Union Walkoff Plan Fizzles,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 9 December 1966, Book 3, Part 1, Box 10a, MAFWM-UTA.

Benito area of Texas, there were 3,020 unemployed U.S. residents, while there were 2,032 alien commuters. Thus it is clear why Orendain was so preoccupied with commuters, as preventing their use not only would increase wages for Texas workers but it would also drastically reduce unemployment. Stopping even a small portion of the “40-50,000 alien commuters [who] commute daily” would indeed have had a dramatic effect on the working and living conditions of Texas farm workers.<sup>60</sup>

Faced by the growers’ legal power, the collusion of law enforcement, and their army of commuter workers, the situation going into December 1966 looked increasingly bleak. On December 13, Orendain decided to try a new approach – a simple plea to the management of La Casita – to allow its workers to vote on whether they wanted unionization. Orendain wrote a letter to La Casita management wishing them a merry Christmas and requesting elections for their field workers. He claimed that a foreman for the farm welcomed the election requests, although management later argued this was a lie. The farm ignored the request, saying it was merely another propaganda ploy on the part of Orendain, to which the union leader replied that the workers had a right to “have a vote in their destiny.”<sup>61</sup> With momentum in their favor, the growers had no reason to give in. Moreover, most people thought the union leadership was about to be in serious legal trouble. Orendain, Nelson, and Chandler were scheduled to appear at an upcoming Justice of the Peace hearing in Roma on December 19 about the Halloween incident and charges

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<sup>60</sup> “The Impact of Alien Commuters Upon the Economy of U.S. Towns on the Mexican Border,” U.S. Department of Labor, October 1967, Series 11, Folder 4, Box 1, Texas AFL-CIO Mexican-American Affairs Committee, Texas Labor Archives, University Library Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter MAAC-UTA).

<sup>61</sup> Clipping, “Merry Christmas Wish, Union Vote Request Sent to La Casita Farms,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 12 December 1966, 1,3; clipping, “Farms Will Ignore Election Request,” *Houston Chronicle*, 14 December 1966, both in Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

of “secondary picketing” concerning the stoppage of the train on November 3.<sup>62</sup> Many thought this would be the end of the union in the Río Grande Valley, perhaps even Orendain, who could only anticipate the outcome of the hearing. To the chagrin of the growers, the ruling was surprisingly light. At the hearing, the most serious charge – obstruction – was dropped. The Justice instead fined each of the three men \$25 for their participation in the “lay-in.” Though happy with the outcome, Orendain publicly stated the union would discuss with its lawyer the possibility of false-arrest charges against the county stemming from this and other incidents.<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, another caravan was planned, this time a “Christmas Caravan” that was scheduled to leave Austin and Houston on December 17 and arrive in Río Grande City the following day.<sup>64</sup> Although the success of this drive is not documented, it is noteworthy that people in other cities were charitably supporting the union. Picketing activities, however, still remained sparse, because Orendain and other union members were still having various legal problems.

By late December, Orendain desperately wanted to turn momentum in the union’s favor. Thus, the union planned a march from Mexico City to Río Grande City with a Mexican farm workers’ union beginning December 30. The march never took place, but in preparation Orendain commented that “this would be international publicity that would be bad for this country, and we do not want that unless [the growers] force us to act. We would stop demonstrations in 30 days if La Casita would grant an election,” implying they

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<sup>62</sup> Clipping, “Union Planning ‘Law and Order’ at Hearing,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 15 December 1966, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>63</sup> Clipping, “Starr Union Studies Suit for False Arrest,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 20 December 1966, 1, 3, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>64</sup> Clipping, “Christmas Caravan for ‘La Huelga,’” Folder 4, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.



would move on to picket other farms.<sup>65</sup> As pressure was still light on La Casita, they had little reason to fear an international march. Orendain was trying to give the movement new life, realizing that 1966 was ending on a sour note for Local 2.

Although it was clear to him that the struggle to win collective bargaining for the workers in Texas would be much more difficult than in California, Orendain's efforts to this point must be applauded. He had proven himself a leader in the mold of Chávez, showing dedication and a willingness to suffer for the cause. Only time would tell if 1967 would be more successful for him. By New Year's Eve the strike was six months old, and though they had not improved farm workers' conditions they were at least attempting to make progress – notably, without much outside assistance, including help from Chávez. Why had Chávez sent Orendain and Chandler in September and done little else to assist the strike? Indeed, aside from his November statement, Chávez had been completely taciturn. His distance, and subsequently that of the UFWOC, from the movement in Texas would eventually drive him and Orendain apart. However, by the end of 1966 his unspoken lack of enthusiasm for the Starr County strike was not a major issue, as Texas had its own version, albeit a smaller one, of the UFWOC's leader.

Orendain's creativity was again at work in early January 1967. He and other union leaders planned a "1,000 mile boat raft trip down the Río Grande from El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico," with an English-Spanish sign for each side protesting the use of "green carders." The trip was to begin in early February, and about four people would occupy the

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<sup>65</sup> Clipping, Sam Gerald, "Big Farm Problems Detailed," Valley Morning Star, 31 December 1966, 1-2, Book 3, Part 1, Box 10a, MAFWM-UTA.

raft, which would beach each night on the U.S. side.<sup>66</sup> Before this event could happen, there were other positive developments for the union. In December 1966 the strike gained the attention of some AFL-CIO officials who sent Pancho Medrano, roving troubleshooter, to bolster organized labor's presence. He was only in the Valley for one day, but the AFL-CIO promised his return and that the organization would assist Local 2.<sup>67</sup>

Since La Casita refused Orendain's request for elections, the union held a large demonstration in front of the farm on January 4, 1967. Results were typical; Orendain and four others were arrested, held for a few hours, and released.<sup>68</sup> More importantly, the Equal Opportunity Committee of the AFL-CIO decided to hold a meeting in the Valley to discuss the activities of the union and local reaction towards them. The meeting, chaired by Henry Muñoz and Roy Evans, took place at the Fairway Motel in McAllen on January 8-9. Pancho Medrano also attended. All the leaders of Local 2 attended and, aside from discussing the minimum wage and collective bargaining, Orendain gave a heartfelt speech on working and living conditions in the Valley. After hearing about the poor conditions, one AFL-CIO representative, Franklin García, "urged more civil disobedience to gain better pay."<sup>69</sup> The AFL-CIO was clearly interested in assisting the workers with their struggle.

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<sup>66</sup> Clipping, "Farm Union Plans Protest Voyage Down Rio Grande to Gulf in a Month," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 4 January 1967, 1, 3, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>67</sup> Clipping, "Hearing Postponed on Farm Union Charges," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 5 January 1967, 1, 3, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>68</sup> Clipping, "Several Farm Union Members Arrested After Demonstration," *Rio Grande Herald*, 5 January 1967, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>69</sup> Clipping, "Labor Group Slates McAllen Meet," *San Antonio Light*, 8 January 1967; clipping, "Farm Union Leaders Expected to be Present in State AFL-CIO Meeting," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 8 January 1967, 1,3; clipping, "'Cactus Curtain' Down For Farm Workers, AFL-CIO Meet Told Here," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 8 January 1967, 1,3, all in Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

Local reaction to the meeting was typical. Instead of concern for farm labor problems and the union's issues, local media and growers focused on the comments made by García. Indeed, one article in a local paper stated that García and Muñoz "incurred great wrath from Starr County officials and some of the media."<sup>70</sup>

Muñoz was extremely sympathetic to the cause. He continually criticized the growers and the Department of Labor for the use of green carders and even lamented the commuters' situation, saying the growers treated them just as badly as they did Texas workers. For instance, Muñoz claimed growers forced the commuters to work day and night and if the workers complained would simply call immigration and have them deported. He also claimed that growers sometimes drove wages down so low (.10 cents per hour), that all the Texas workers would migrate to other areas, thus inflating the need for commuters on their farms. Muñoz also criticized his own organization, saying the AFL-CIO could easily give Chávez millions from their treasury to organize in South Texas, but for some reason they just "won't do it."<sup>71</sup> This was unfortunate for Orendain and Local 2, because financial backing would have made a huge difference. However, given the availability of countless strikebreakers right across the border, the AFL-CIO's reluctance to get involved is understandable.

Needing a new tactic to force La Casita to negotiate, at the end of the month the union announced a national boycott of all La Casita products. Orendain said pickets would be placed in front of any store selling La Casita lettuce or celery. He also said the boycott would move into other states with the help of AFL-CIO affiliated unions. "We didn't really

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<sup>70</sup> Clipping, "Union Statements Draw Reply," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 10 January 1967, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>71</sup> Henry Muñoz Jr., interview by Charles Carr Winn, 12 August 1971, OHP-UTA.

want to do this,” Orendain argued, “but they wouldn’t give us a chance for elections or recognize us as a collective bargaining agent. This is our only weapon now.”<sup>72</sup> The boycott gained the endorsement of both the AFL-CIO and the UFWOC.<sup>73</sup>

Some media outlets covered the boycott, noting that the union accused La Casita of “only paying workers .30-.70 cents per hour.”<sup>74</sup> Farm management immediately countered the boycott announcement, saying they would push for an injunction if the union picketed stores. A spokesman for the farm claimed the only legal picketing the union could do was “what it had been doing on the premises” of the farm.<sup>75</sup> With the farm’s success in squelching union activities in the months prior to the boycott, it was only natural to threaten further legal action, as the union could likely be defeated in court. Orendain was immensely frustrated, and the union had previously tried everything short of a boycott, and thus far nothing had been effective. The specter of further legal activity and possibility of more arrests were a headache for him.

However, to Orendain’s credit, facing legal opposition he pressed on with the strike and boycott. By calling for a boycott, it is again striking how Orendain emulated Chávez. Like Orendain, Chávez had called a boycott of the large grape growers in California only when they remained obstinate and refused to negotiate with him; Orendain did the same thing and even appeared regretful in doing so. Also, throughout this time Orendain never

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<sup>72</sup> Clipping, “Union Boycotting Products of Farm,” *Austin-American Statesman*, 31 January 1967, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>73</sup> Clipping, “National Fight Vowed by Union,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 31 January 1967, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>74</sup> Clipping, “Farm Union Plans Boycott,” *San Antonio Express*, 1 February 1967, 1-C, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>75</sup> Clipping, Sam Gerald, “Injunction Action is Contemplated by La Casita Farms,” *Harlingen Valley Star*, 2 February 1967, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

complained that things were moving too slowly. Instead, he was patient, hard working, and when tactics proved unsuccessful he thought of new, creative ways to demonstrate against the growers. There is no indication that Chávez was unhappy with Orendain or his actions in the Valley. Orendain's representation of nonviolence and the union's mission must have been satisfactory for Chávez.

Chávez also would have been happy with the support five Roman Catholic priests from the San Antonio Archdiocese displayed for the union on February 1, 1967. On that day, Orendain and the five priests – who according to Orendain were “here as neutral observers, to see that we were conducting the demonstrations without violence –” along with a group of *buelgistas* used a road on La Casita property to get to the property of Thomas Bazán, a “union sympathizer who Orendain said gave them permission to use his land.” The demonstrators used Bazán's property to yell invectives against the workers at La Casita and convince them to walk off the job. However, farm officials claimed, “they came into the middle of the farm and were yelling and shouting,” whereas “before they had stayed on the roadsides and off La Casita property.” The police were called in, and Orendain, the priests, and other demonstrators were arrested. According to Orendain, the group was not “charged with trespassing but with disturbing the peace, [although] we only had a regulation number of pickets there.”<sup>76</sup>

Orendain, the *buelgistas*, and the five priests were eventually released “on their own recognizance,” but San Antonio Archbishop Robert E. Lucey sent two of the priests, who “failed to obtain ecclesiastical permission to go to Rio Grande City,” to meditate in a New

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<sup>76</sup> Clipping, “Five Priests Return Home,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 2 February 1967, 1,3; clipping, “Five Others Picked Up By Lawmen,” *Valley Morning Star*, 2 February 1967, both in Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

Mexico monastery. Many mistakenly thought this indicated a strained relationship between the union and the church, not realizing that Lucey himself fully supported the strike.<sup>77</sup> After meeting with Lucey and re-solidifying the church-union relationship, Orendain again felt the need to publicly defend union actions through the media, hoping to counteract what he saw as increasingly negative coverage of the union's activities:

Our purpose is to organize the migrant workers of all farm labor to protect the individual rights of employees...We are not out to blackmail growers, as they claim. Growers themselves would have the protection of knowing that when workers are needed, they would be available if a contract was signed ahead of time.

Orendain continued, reiterating that collective bargaining, instead of a minimum wage, was needed to ensure fair treatment of the workers.<sup>78</sup>

Though again publicly thrown on the defensive, Local 2 pushed on with the boycott. Gilbert Padilla, Orendain's eventual replacement as leader of the strike, and Jim Drake were sent in from California to help further organize the boycott. Padilla's job was to contact supermarkets and coordinate the efforts of boycott committees in Corpus Christi, San Antonio, and Austin. Orendain hoped to pattern the boycott after the NFWA's boycott against Schenley and DiGiorgio, which successfully brought "Schenley to the bargaining table."<sup>79</sup> However, the growers would not remain idle. Several Valley

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<sup>77</sup> Clipping, "Boycott Mounts as FBI Probes Valley Arrests;" clipping, "Union Seeks Meet With Lucey On Order to Priests," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 5 February 1967, 1,3, both in Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>78</sup> Clipping, Arthur Moczygemba, "Valley Man Claims Wages Not an Issue," *San Antonio Express-News*, 4 February 1967, 12-A, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>79</sup> Clipping, "Strikers Push Boycott," *Alamo Messenger*, 2 February 1967, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

growers banded together in support of La Casita, promising to back the farm and fight the boycott in all ways possible.<sup>80</sup> A long, protracted struggle lay in the months ahead.

The union did however make some immediate gains. Safeway, and another large supermarket chain whose name was undisclosed, agreed to honor the boycott until a settlement was reached. By mid-February 1967, the total number of boycotted stores reached 250 and Padilla and the various committees continued pressuring others. Meanwhile, the FBI investigated the February 1 arrests, as the union officially complained the arrests were unfair and in violation of their civil rights.<sup>81</sup> Orendain was thrilled that events seemed to be turning in his favor and, and as the boycott continued through March, media coverage of the union became more positive. The *Dallas Morning News* ran an excellent biographical article on Orendain, who was recognized as “second in voice in the union only to Cesar Chavez.” The article went on to describe Orendain’s appeal as very Chávez-like:

Orendain usually dresses like a field worker in dirty black boots, blue denim jeans and bright sport shirts. When he talks of “victory for my people” his teeth glisten under a curling black mustache. He has the deliberate gait and slight stoop of those who have spent much of their youth on bent knees working in the lettuce and cabbage fields.

With such a favorable impression of Orendain, the union could no longer claim a negative media bias. The article continued, quoting Orendain:

For months I worked for \$2.50 a day in the fields of California and I swore someday I would help myself and my people get a better life and the respect of our

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<sup>80</sup> Clipping, “Rio Grande Valley Farmers Join to Beat Boycott,” *Jacksonville Progress*, 14 February 1967; clipping, “Valley Farmers Resist Boycott,” *Gonzales Inquirer*, 14 February 1967; clipping, “Fight Set For Union Boycott,” *Henderson News*, 14 February 1967; clipping, “Valley Farmers Join Hands to Fight Boycott,” *Bonham Favorite*, 14 February 1967, all in Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>81</sup> Clipping, “Boycott Mounts as FBI Probes Valley Arrests,” clipping, “FBI Investigates Ten RGC Arrests,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 8 February 1967, both in Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

employers...I don't mind going to jail. I'd spend five years in jail to get a victory for my people.<sup>82</sup>

Orendain was recognized as the movement's leader in Texas, reiterating his standing as the "César Chávez of Texas." It appeared as though momentum was on the cusp of changing in favor of Orendain and Local 2.

That hope soon receded. Events wore on through March and April and progress again stalled for the union. By the end of March, Orendain said "the people here are much worse off than in Delano," and donations to help feed the poor workers were necessary.<sup>83</sup> Orendain also recognized that halting shipments from the upcoming cantaloupe harvest in late May and early June could determine whether the strikers won or lost, as cantaloupes were highly perishable and if lost could be financially disastrous for the growers.<sup>84</sup>

Chávez's continued reticence on the Starr County strike is baffling. Orendain's statement that the strikers in Texas were "worse off than in Delano" is accurate in several ways. Not only were wages, living and working conditions worse, but also grower opposition in Texas was much stronger. After almost nine months of striking, the union had accomplished little. This was not the fault of Orendain; the Secretary-Treasurer did his best with the resources he had, and with little visible or vocal support from his boss. Although Chávez joined Orendain in applauding a statement in late April by the Catholic

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<sup>82</sup> Clipping, Gary Garrison, "Shout of 'Huelga!' Shatters Village's Tranquility," *Dallas Morning News*, 26 March 1967, 3D, Folder 1, Box 5, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>83</sup> Ray Martin, "La Huelga: The Desperate Cry Along the Rio Grande," *UAW Solidarity*, March 1967, 3, 11, Folder 1, Box 5, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>84</sup> "National Campaign for Agricultural Democracy," 10 April 1967, Folder 1, Box 5, MAFWM-UTA.



Bishops of Texas “supporting the right of farm workers to form unions,”<sup>85</sup> perhaps his nominal support was due to his preoccupation with union activity in California.

Because Local 2 was not strongly supported by its two parent organizations, the UFWOC and the AFL-CIO, the movement was deteriorating. During the strike Chávez realized that organizing in Texas was more difficult than in California. He was quoted later in the 1970s saying, “spreading the movement to places like Texas was for the future. Before you can run, you have to learn to walk.”<sup>86</sup> Having lost heart, Chávez only wanted to focus on California, which explains his following actions.

Orendain’s last act as administrator of the Starr County strike was a trip to a San Jacinto Day celebration in Dallas on April 23, 1967. The trip’s purpose was to plead with local Democrats to salvage the movement.<sup>87</sup> He returned to the Valley, but in early May was ordered by Chávez to return to Delano, and Gilbert Padilla became leader of the Starr County strike. According to Orendain, Chávez wanted him to return to Delano to work in the union’s accounting department “pushing pencils.”<sup>88</sup> His tenure as the leader of the Starr County strike was officially over.

According to one historian, “Chavez realized that organizing efforts in Texas were premature and in 1967 decided to pull back.”<sup>89</sup> This statement puts into perspective Chávez’s decision to replace Orendain with Padilla. The decision was not made because Chávez thought the union had a better chance of winning under Padilla, rather, the

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<sup>85</sup> Clipping, “Texas Bishops’ Statement Hailed by Farm Labor Leaders,” *Texas Catholic*, 22 April 1967, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>86</sup> César Chávez, “The Organizer’s Tale,” in *Mexican Workers in the United States*, 62.

<sup>87</sup> Clipping, “Farm Workers Ask Democrats to Rescue Them,” *Jacksonville Progress*, 24 April 1967, Folder 5, Box 4, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>88</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>89</sup> Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization*, 33.

decision was made because Chávez valued Orendain and wanted him to work in the area he considered most important – California. Therefore, in Chávez’s mind Orendain’s replacement was a promotion, not a demotion. Clearly, Chávez must have considered Orendain’s activities in Texas a job well done – Orendain had acted faithfully as his representative in Texas and upheld the integrity of the union and its cause. He had struggled for social justice for the farm workers and, although no concessions were won, he prosecuted the movement as Chávez would have in his place.

And what of the Starr County strike? Inevitably, the movement declined and in the summer of 1967 the strike and boycott were defeated. Several reasons can be cited for the union’s defeat: the union failed to successfully combat the anti-democratic power structure of Starr County, and the growers and local power structure were in cahoots, making a victory by the poorly-funded and supported Local 2 nearly impossible. By starting the movement with no outside support, Eugene Nelson failed to consider such problems as the importation of Mexican workers, a strike fund, or a local power machine “willing to use anything at its disposal” to defeat a unionization movement. That “Nelson happened to get involved in the worst county in the worst state in which to win a strike” and that “the strike began with a wave of enthusiasm, with no conception at all of the difficulties facing the strikers,” is indeed an accurate statement.<sup>90</sup> As an inexperienced labor organizer who had served only as picket captain in the Delano strike, Nelson should not have started the movement without Chávez. By rushing the union into the strike and not addressing these various issues, the strike was practically doomed from the start. The union simply could not fight growers, law enforcement, and green-carders all at the same time.

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<sup>90</sup> Doug Adair, “Texas Strike,” *Liberation*, August 1967, 6-9.

The “César Chávez of Texas” went back to work in California having proven himself as dedicated to the farm workers’ movement. His replacement, Padilla, would work for the next two years in the Valley, but the effort proved so difficult that by 1969 Padilla succumbed to depression and alcoholism, necessitating his hospitalization and also Orendain’s return in the spring of 1969.<sup>91</sup> Thus, it would not be long before Orendain returned to fight on behalf of the Río Grande Valley farm workers. It would be sooner that his relationship with Chávez began falling apart.

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<sup>91</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA; Steiner, *La Raza*, 375.

## CHAPTER 3

### THINGS FALL APART

Antonio Orendain remained in Delano, California from May 1967 until March 1969, when César Chávez allowed him to return to the Río Grande Valley. During this sojourn his creativity again became evident. On his own initiative, the Secretary-Treasurer began a Spanish-language radio program, an idea he had since the inception of the NFWA. Entitled “*La Voz del Campesino*” (“The Voice of the Farm Worker”) Orendain claimed the show reached many workers and also drew many complaints from local growers. He continued the program later when he returned to South Texas. He also ran a pro-farm worker television program out of Hanford, California, which informed workers of federal wage and labor laws and which growers not to work for. When he was not running these two programs or attending to union business, Orendain, who had a wife and five children to support, earned additional income by picking cotton.<sup>1</sup>

Aside from these activities, the summer and winter of 1967 were relatively quiet for Orendain, considering what he had left behind and what lay ahead. The Starr County strike ended on June 16, when a district judge granted a “temporary injunction” – which was to last about six years – at the request of La Casita to curtail picketing during the harvest.<sup>2</sup> The movement in South Texas was effectively quashed, although Padilla remained in the Valley. Padilla testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor in Río Grande City

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<sup>1</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>2</sup> Carr Winn, “The Valley Farm Workers Movement, 1966-1967,” 79-80.

on June 29, 1967,<sup>3</sup> but his efforts at organizing workers in the wake of the Starr County strike were unfruitful. Also in June, President Johnson established the Inter Agency Committee on Mexican American affairs to address farm workers' problems.<sup>4</sup> This was important because the UFWOC now had an official agency within the government to send their complaints.

The rest of 1967 passed uneventfully for the UFWOC, but in February and March of 1968, the first public sign of tension between Orendain and Chávez appeared. In a speech on February 19, Chávez announced he would begin a 25-day fast for peace and non-violence, seeking to "inspire the workers but also to strengthen public opinion on the union's behalf."<sup>5</sup> In some regards, the tactic proved successful. The national media took a great interest in the fast and the *New York Times* published two articles sympathetic to Chávez when it ended.<sup>6</sup> Though Chávez successfully garnered public sympathy, the fast proved controversial within the ranks of the union, especially with Orendain.

Orendain vehemently opposed the use of religion or religious imagery in the movement and thought a highly publicized, pious image of Chávez would be detrimental to the union. Thus, Orendain led other union members in a boycott of the fast and a refusal to attend the subsequent mass at union headquarters when it ended. This was a bold move, considering that the fast gained so much attention that Robert Kennedy attended the mass to take communion with Chávez. Nevertheless, Orendain was highly displeased with

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 82; Gilbert Padilla, "Farm Workers Need Bargaining Rights," *Labor Today*, August-September 1967, 2-5, Folder 13, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>4</sup> Vincente T. Ximenes to Henry Muñoz Jr., 13 September 1967, Series 11, Folder 1, Box 1, MAAC-UTA.

<sup>5</sup> Matthiessen, *Sal Si Puedes*, 179-180; Gómez-Quiñónez, *Mexican-American Labor*, 247.

<sup>6</sup> Wallace Turner, "Head of Farm Workers Union Ends 25-Day Fast in California," also, "A Farm Bred Unionist: Cesar Estrada Chavez," both in *New York Times*, 11 March 1968, 22.

Chávez and to protest this “religious folly” he “sat with his back toward Chávez when they discussed union business” during the fast. Some union leaders and volunteers even quit the movement because they thought Chávez was developing a “messiah complex.” Thus, although this pious display may have worked for those outside the movement, clearly a schism could be seen developing within the UFWOC.<sup>7</sup>

Making this schism worse was the fact that some began denouncing Orendain for not supporting Chávez’s fast. Unfortunately there is no record of what Chávez thought of Orendain’s opposition. However, Dolores Huerta, Vice President of the union, was clearly incensed with the Secretary-Treasurer:

I wasn’t in Delano at all during the fast, but a lot of unpleasant things happened there at that time in terms of the organization. Tony Orendain, who was secretary-treasurer of the Union, was very cynical against the church. He was one of the guys that was a leader in all of the conflicts that took place when Cesar went on the fast. There’s an awful lot of bigotry even among Mexicans, especially the ones from Mexico.<sup>8</sup>

Huerta’s denunciation of Orendain for boycotting the fast seems harsh, as “bigotry” was a strong accusation against someone taking a moralistic stand. The real problem was Orendain’s headstrong personality, his hostility toward the Church, and his unwillingness to completely submit to Chávez. Simply because he did not agree with Chávez’s piousness Orendain was highly resented by Huerta and others. This is not, however, evidence of any disloyalty to the movement – Orendain always remained committed to the cause. However, the controversy surrounding the fast revealed that tension between Orendain, Chávez, and other union leaders was starting to boil over. With time, this tension would become worse.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthiessen, *Sal Si Puedes*, 181; Ferris, *The Fight in the Fields*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 277.

During the fast, Padilla announced the union in Texas was “bringing suit against the Rangers for civil rights violations and to challenge basic Texas labor laws.”<sup>9</sup> Though at the time uneventful, this lawsuit proved important after Orendain’s return to Texas in 1969. Meanwhile, in California, Orendain began writing articles and editorials for the union’s newspaper, *El Malcriado*.<sup>10</sup> He took up the work with his usual gusto and in June 1968 his first two articles appeared, one lamenting the death of Robert Kennedy and one describing a “goodwill tour” he and Larry Itliong had taken to Brazil.<sup>11</sup> His experience with *El Malcriado* proved valuable when Orendain started his own newspaper, *El Cubamil*, after returning to the Río Grande Valley.

Much like the previous year, the rest of 1968 was largely uneventful for the movement. In July, Chávez displayed his dedication to nonviolence by canceling a strike in California’s Coachella Valley because growers there had used violence against several strikers.<sup>12</sup> Texas was even quieter. Local 2 accomplished little and South Texas growers continued harvesting their crops. The Starr County political machine was so disinterested in the movement that none of the more than 100 arrests pertaining to the strike was scheduled for trial.<sup>13</sup> The Valley growers clearly thought that the union and its “outside agitators” were defeated and never to be heard from again.

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<sup>9</sup> Clipping, Chuck Schwantz, “Ranger Trial is Opened With Union’s Testimony,” *Brownsville Herald*, 11 June 1968, 1, Folder 1, Box 2, Pancho Medrano Papers, Texas Labor Archives, University Library Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter PMP-UTA).

<sup>10</sup> The “ill-begotten,” a reference to the hard life of the average worker.

<sup>11</sup> Orendain, “Our Friend, May He Rest in Peace;” and, “Open Letter to Brazil,” both in *El Malcriado*, 15 June 1968, 3-4, 6, Folder 2, Box 2, PMP-UTA.

<sup>12</sup> “Farm Union Leader Urges End to California Strike,” *New York Times*, 3 July 1968, 24.

<sup>13</sup> UFWOC Newsletter, 1968, Folder 8, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

The stubborn Orendain had other plans. During his sojourn in Delano Orendain reminisced about the Starr County Strike and thought he pinpointed where the union went wrong: namely, by striking too quickly under Nelson and by focusing efforts on only one grower, La Casita. He also realized that if the UFWOC was to succeed it needed Texas because Texas produced 60-79 percent of the nation's migrant workers. He knew that the Valley was "the bottom of the social barrel" and that a collective bargaining contract could take years, but nevertheless he lobbied Chávez to be sent back so he could "try again." By now it was well known that Padilla was depressed and having trouble with alcoholism, so who better to take his place as Texas director than the man who held the position previously? Perhaps Orendain also wanted to distance himself from Chávez and the other union leaders, and have more autonomous control over his own activities. Chávez relented, and in March 1969 Orendain, with his wife Raquel, their five children and \$350 from Chávez, left Delano for the Río Grande Valley.<sup>14</sup>

Arriving on March 17, Orendain was determined to avoid the critical mistakes of the Starr County strike. He wanted to avoid relying on the AFL-CIO or the churches for outside help. This however proved unrealistic. Immediately, the AFL-CIO donated money to keep Orendain's radio show going in the Valley, the Alliance for Labor Action (the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers) in Washington, D.C. donated land and an office to the union, and the Kennedy Memorial Foundation provided three lawyers specifically for the Texas movement. It appeared that Orendain was armed and ready once again.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



The radio program, *La Voz del Campesino*, remained a staple of Orendain's presence in the Valley for years. Broadcasting six days a week at 6 a.m. on KGBT 1530 in Harlingen, Orendain used the fifteen-minute Spanish language program to "educate people" and "make people think" about the rights of the farm workers. He also used the program to criticize free enterprise, saying it worked "well for the rich and educated but takes advantage of the poor and uneducated."<sup>16</sup> Through the show he also promoted collective bargaining and spent a large amount of time answering letters from listeners concerning various issues. Orendain claimed his radio show was the most effective means of reaching people in South Texas and North Mexico. Notably, the show received the continued support and praise of Chávez, who thought it a good way to connect with the people.<sup>17</sup> In 1969, Chávez had not yet lost faith in his Secretary-Treasurer.

Aside from rejuvenating the radio program, upon arrival Orendain made other moves. Finding an "open legacy of bitterness" to the union in Río Grande City, he relocated union headquarters temporarily to McAllen, eventually moving again to San Juan in Hidalgo County. Also, in response to complaints of poor funding for the previous efforts, Orendain announced that there would be no striking until the union was "financially and organizationally able to do so." During his period away from the Valley, a militant Chicano youth movement developed in South Texas and, in order to avoid "gringo hatred," Orendain announced a policy of the union "avoiding close contact with militant or

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<sup>16</sup> Orendain, "Farm Worker Newsletter," Folder 4, Box 1, Fort Worth Boycott Council, Texas Labor Archives, University Library Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter FWBC-UTA); Carr Winn, "The Valley Farm Workers' Movement, 1966-1967," 98-99; Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.; "KGBT Program Summaries United Farm Workers Organizing Committee," Folder 14A, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

racist Mexican-American groups.”<sup>18</sup> Though this would eventually change, Orendain hoped to avoid a backlash from the politically powerful Anglo establishment.

Thus Orendain began his work, purposefully but quietly. One issue he did not address was the Texas Rangers, but he did not have to – the lawsuit the union had brought against them under Padilla was still pending and Walter Mondale, chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, toured the Valley in late March to learn of the injustices Rangers committed against the workers in the spring of 1967.<sup>19</sup> Orendain’s other work was organizational in nature, tenaciously building support for the union. Nevertheless, in one incident he did complain to the local press that labor contractors in Hidalgo County were siphoning money from the pay of citrus pickers. However, the newspaper article also criticized Orendain, saying he could not prove the charges. When asked why he was not doing anything to rectify the situation, Orendain claimed that the workers were apathetic and did not know how to properly complain, but that “the union was trying to change that.”<sup>20</sup> He was noticeably quiet in the press for the rest of the summer, perhaps realizing that any local media attention given to the union would be increasingly negative.

Orendain worked quietly for the rest of the summer. He claimed the union was working “under the ground” because based on their experiences with local authorities they could not work in the open. The media claimed that his activities were not stirring as much

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Ray Bailey, “Farm Labor and the Starr County Strike” (M.A. Thesis, Texas Christian University, 1973), 75-76.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Mondale to Pancho Medrano, 3 April 1969, Folder 2, Box 1, PMP-UTA. Aside from the rough handling loose interpretation of Texas picketing laws during Orendain’s leadership of the Starr County strike, the Rangers were accused of excessive violence and beating several union members during Padilla’s tenure.

<sup>20</sup> Clipping, Kenneth Clark, “Union Man Fails to Prove up Charges of Unfair Wage,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 7 July 1969, 1, 3A, Folder 5, Box 6a, MAFWM-UTA.

interest as they had in 1966, and that Orendain was hard to locate and reticent when found. He did, however, dispute La Casita's claim that the union did not represent any of its workers: "We have membership now among the workers," he told a local reporter in August 1969. "I am not going to say how many because no matter what number I give, the local press would make a minority of it." He also scoffed at the temporary injunction against picketing, saying he did not realize 900 days was "temporary." He further ruminated:

They say justice is blind. Justice is not blind at all – it's just looking at us through the eyes of the power structure. When I first came to this country I was content to break my back for .80 cents an hour. I wasn't an "outsider" then. I was just a good, hard-working Mexican. When I started trying to organize workers to insist on a decent wage – that's when I became an outsider. We're going to be here from now on. We'll go underground and keep right on working.<sup>21</sup>

Orendain was clearly much more jaded than when he arrived in the Valley in 1966. Rhetorically he was angry and militant, a quality that does not appear in his public statements during the Starr County strike. His growing alienation within the union may have contributed to this, along with a realization that his current efforts might take years to achieve fruition. However, for the time being he had to be patient, which he knew but did not like.

The UFWOC was not concerned with Orendain and his activities, and for the time remained focused on California. A group in Fort Worth sympathetic to the grape boycott held a fundraiser to contribute to the Texas UFWOC, but their contribution was minimal.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Clipping, Gary Garrison, "Union Organizers Still Work – Quietly – In the Valley," *San Angelo Morning Standard Times*, 10 August 1969, Folder 5, Box 6a, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>22</sup> Shirley Swallow to Boycotters, 22 July 1969, Folder 4, Box 1, FWBC-UTA; "Invitation to Benefit Cocktail Party From Shirley Swallow," Folder 3, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.

Also in August Chávez went on another 25-day fast for “nonviolence,”<sup>23</sup> an event that was applauded nationally by the union and its supporters but undoubtedly scoffed at by Orendain.

As the summer of 1969 ended Orendain announced a major organizing drive to commence the coming winter. The union planned to purchase an 8-acre plot of land for a “farm worker service center,” which would include health services and an insurance plan. The union was also working with *Colonias del Valle*, “a community self-help group” in the Valley led by a union member. The groups encouraged voter registration and political action as an important part of upcoming activities, and hoped to strengthen their numbers through grass roots organizing. In reference to voter registration, Orendain remarked that “even if the workers are with you 100%, you can’t win a strike here until you have changed some of the basic structure of the establishment.” He also again complained about the injunction against picketing La Casita and about the fact that over 100 union members had been arrested during the strike and not brought to trial, causing the union to have to pay over \$20,000 in bail to the local political establishment. He boldly proclaimed this was going to stop:

We’re going to create a new social and political order here in Texas, where men are truly equal before the law; where the laws provide justice, not injustice; where the police and judges seek to protect the innocent, not terrorize them. We have a long way to go. But we’re not going to turn back, never again.<sup>24</sup>

Orendain’s announcement signaled the end of his “quiet” work during the summer of 1969. Although he was clearly much more cynical and jaded than before, Orendain’s

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<sup>23</sup> “Chavez Improves!” *The Boycott Voice*, 20 August 1969, 3, Folder 6, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.

<sup>24</sup> “Orendain Sparks UFWOC Drive in Texas,” *El Malcriado*, 15 August – 15 September 1969, 13, Folder 4, Box 2, PMP-UTA.

statement raises the question of over-zealousness. Did he really believe the union could change the social and political order of South Texas? It appears so, and it also appears he was determined to not let anything stop him – not growers, authorities, or even his own union’s hierarchy.

Orendain’s ambitious, threatening statement must have taken the growers and authorities aback. A few weeks before the organizing drive began, Orendain was espousing non-violent social change as the union’s main goal,<sup>25</sup> hoping to counteract the overzealous image of him and the union in the local media. Another event that benefited the union’s image was an appearance by Chávez in Fort Worth on November 26. The purpose of the appearance – which included a press conference and Thanksgiving celebration – was to publicize the UFWOC’s grape boycott and deter rising grape sales in North Texas.<sup>26</sup> At the press conference Chávez reiterated his nonviolent philosophy, saying under no circumstance would the union turn to violence because non-violence was a much more powerful weapon. He also made another interesting statement that went largely unnoticed. Chávez stated he wanted to renew the “campaign of the Texas Rio Grande Valley which had failed in 1967.”<sup>27</sup> This is important because it lent credibility to what Orendain was currently doing in the Valley, but Chávez would contradict himself over the next few years,

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<sup>25</sup> Orendain, “Farm Worker Newsletter,” 7 November 1969, Folder 8, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>26</sup> Clipping, Mabel Gouldy, “Chavez to Appear Here,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, Evening Edition, 13 November 1969, 4-A, Folder 2, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.

<sup>27</sup> Clipping, “Boycott Leader Assails Grape Aid,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, 26 November 1969, Folder 2, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.

repeatedly claiming the union was not ready to organize in Texas.<sup>28</sup> Thus Orendain erroneously believed Chávez would soon be ready to support activity in the Valley.

After his appearance in Fort Worth, Chávez went to McAllen on November 30. There he reiterated his pledge to an audience of more than 1200 farm workers in the McAllen Civic Auditorium, saying that after the grape strike was finished “Texas would be one of the top priority areas for organizing farm workers and building a truly national farm workers’ union.” He also claimed the UFWOC was “feeling new strength and vitality in South Texas,” under the leadership of Orendain and his wife Raquel. Orendain, who also spoke at the event, was highly enthused:

We want to stress that this union is for all workers, regardless of citizenship. We are trying to help all farm workers, whether they are from Texas, Mexico, or any other state. We have learned a lot from our past mistakes trying to organize here in Texas. Now we are building the union from the ground up. No flashy publicity, no dramatic but hopeless strikes. Just the hard work of organizing a union and building it up until it is strong enough to win for the farm workers those rights and benefits which other American workers enjoy.<sup>29</sup>

Several important conclusions can be drawn from the McAllen Convention. First, Chávez truly meant what he said and at the time anticipated a full-fledged campaign in the Valley when the grape strike ended. Second, Orendain had reason to trust Chávez – the union leader publicly promised not just him but the workers themselves that a campaign was nearing. Clearly Orendain did not see his coming alienation from Chávez. Finally, Orendain publicly reiterated his commitment to the workers of South Texas, and demonstrated that he planned on staying until victory was achieved.

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<sup>28</sup> Citing various concerns, Chávez repeatedly claimed the union was not ready to support strikes in South Texas. For example, see, Chávez, “The Organizers Tale,” in *Mexican Workers in the United States*, 57-62; De León, *Mexican Americans in Texas*, 138; Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> “Farm Workers on the March: New Drive in Rio Grande Valley,” *El Malcriado*, 15-30 November 1969, 7, NC-UTA.

The local press reacted with characteristic repugnance to Chávez's presence in the Valley, with one article in the *Valley Morning Star* saying that Chávez, "a friend of the Kennedy's and other bleeding-heart liberals...is doing spade work for a second campaign" to unionize the area's farm workers. Chávez was also accused of favoring high taxes and socialism and the Starr County strike was derided as a "howling flop." The strike was also presented as too small and the union as falsely accusing the Texas Rangers of violence and abuse.<sup>30</sup> This negative press was prompted by a fear of the powerful Chávez making good on his promise to bring the full power of the UFWOC into the Valley. Orendain issued a response, criticizing the local papers and calling them a "tool for the powerful." He also accused a *Valley Morning Star* article of slandering the movement and telling lies. The article had claimed the union dropped its suit against the Rangers, but Orendain argued they were only waiting for the decision of the previous year's trial to be made. He openly invited debate from anyone in the Valley who did not "agree with us."<sup>31</sup>

After the McAllen Convention, Orendain continued his work. *La Voz del Campesino* was drawing a huge response from Mexico where many pledged to support a future strike and not break picket lines. Unfortunately, in late December 1969 the eight acres of land the union had planned to buy was denied them because of "who we were" and "outside forces" also shut down the farm worker medical clinic.<sup>32</sup> Despite these setbacks, Orendain was encouraged by the success of the organizing drive and Chávez's visit. By January 1970 he predicted that a confrontation between the union and growers was imminent, but did

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<sup>30</sup> Clipping, "Cesar Chavez in Valley for Union Spade Work," *Valley Morning Star*, 2 December 1969, 4, Folder 3, Box 9, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>31</sup> Orendain to UFWOC, Folder 3, Box 9, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>32</sup> Orendain, "Farm Worker Newsletter," Folder 6, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.

not know when or where. He was eager for it – “sooner or later we will have a confrontation. I don’t know how long we will stay patient.” He did not say how successful the recent organizing drive had been, but he did claim that aside from its regular members the union had 2,000 signed cards from people saying they were willing to join and pay dues. Although at present they were stressing organization and avoidance of confrontation (at the behest of Chávez),<sup>33</sup> a confrontation occurred in February 1970, although probably not the kind Orendain was hoping for. In West Texas, the union struck Bud Antle Products, a grower of lettuce, celery, artichokes, cabbage, carrots, and broccoli, for using scab labor. The move, however, was directed out of Delano and not the Valley.<sup>34</sup>

On March 3, an organization called The Field Foundation, made up of doctors and medical students, arrived in the Valley to check on the health of farm workers. The union expected only 12-14 families to show up, but after a doctor from the McAllen Polyclinic offered his well-equipped facilities, over 1000 workers arrived. The response was so overwhelming that Orendain went on the radio and announced that no more people could come because they would not be seen. However, the doctors did service everyone who came,<sup>35</sup> and the incident was indicative of the dire need of a health care program such as the union’s defunct medical center.

By April 1970 a general strike was still not planned, although Orendain did admit that the union had quietly negotiated contracts with three separate growers. However, in order to maintain his policy of a partial silence in the media, the names of these growers

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<sup>33</sup> Clipping, “Another Union, Farmer Confrontation is Seen,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 13 January 1970, Folder 5, Box 6a, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>34</sup> Orendain, “UFWOC Newsletter,” February 1970, Folder 8, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>35</sup> Luis Melendrez, “Editorial,” *The Boycott Voice*, April 1970, 6-7, Folder 6, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.



were not released.<sup>36</sup> Also, in early May U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough, a supporter of the union and the grape boycott was defeated in the Democratic primary.<sup>37</sup> The defeat of the incumbent Yarborough was also a defeat for the union in the nation's capitol.

Things remained quiet into the summer. In July Orendain announced the union would fine strikebreakers. Since the picket lines at Bud Antle and in future strikes in Texas would be non-violent, Orendain felt strikebreakers had little reason not to break union pickets.<sup>38</sup> Other than this declaration, Orendain made no headway in the summer of 1970. However, this was not true for the union in California where a historic event occurred later in the month. At 11:10 a.m. on July 29, the grape strike officially ended as the last 26 major grape growers in California, led by the largest, Giumarra Vineyards, signed contracts with the UFWOC. *La Causa* had come to a sudden but successful end.<sup>39</sup>

This turn of events raised the question of whether Chávez would honor his promise to Orendain and the workers of turning the union's attention to the Valley. By August, Orendain was openly saying that the time for Texas to follow "the example of California...each day is closer."<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, this would not be the case, as on September 1, 1970 the UFWOC led a massive strike in the lettuce fields in Salinas,

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<sup>36</sup> Orendain, "United Farm Workers Organizing Committee," April 1970, Folder 8, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>37</sup> Orendain, "United Farm Workers Organizing Committee," May 1970, Folder 8, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA; Winifred Hooper to Luis Melendrez, 19 May 1970, Folder 4, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.

<sup>38</sup> Untitled Document, 13 July 1970, Folder 3, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.

<sup>39</sup> "Huelga Ends!" *El Malcriado*, 1 August 1970, 4-8, NC-UTA.

<sup>40</sup> Orendain, "United Farm Workers Organizing Committee," August 1970, Folder 8, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

California, followed by Chávez's declaration of a general boycott of all head lettuce grown in California and Arizona.<sup>41</sup>

The lettuce strike seemed a sudden move by Chávez. Why did he suddenly decide to boycott lettuce growers, instead of turning union efforts to the Río Grande Valley as he had promised in McAllen? Unfortunately, the Teamsters were the reason. The rival union had signed several lettuce growers in Salinas and other parts of California to contracts, and had designs on other fruit and vegetable industries. Thus Chávez's quick action to protect the UFWOC's standing as the premier farm labor organizer is understandable.<sup>42</sup> It was fortunate for him that the grape strike ended when it did, because this afforded him time to focus on the lettuce growers. It was unfortunate, however, for Orendain, who was ready for a strike in Texas. Not only did the lettuce strike delay action in the Río Grande Valley, but general organizing in the Valley was also canceled indefinitely. All UFWOC members were expected to contribute to the lettuce boycott, and Orendain was the only UFWOC organizer allowed to remain in Texas for other purposes.<sup>43</sup> Starving for support, his efforts remained nominal at best; although ready to strike, Orendain deferred to Chávez and remained loyal to the cause. He had good reason to protest – Chávez had gone back on his word by starting the lettuce strike, but what could Orendain do? He accepted this "slight" quietly, but undoubtedly it contributed to the developing rift between the two.

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<sup>41</sup> "Ten Thousand Farm Workers on Strike in California," *El Malcriado*, 1 September 1970, NC-UTA; *The Boycott Voice*, October 1970, Folder 4, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.

<sup>42</sup> Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 421-422.

<sup>43</sup> Luis Melendrez to Shirley Swallow, 3 October 1970, Folder 11, Box 1, Migrant Farm Workers Collection, Texas Labor Archives, University Library Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter MFWC-UTA).

In October Orendain received a grant for 10 acres of land to build a union building in Alamo, Texas, but this was a somewhat pyrrhic victory. In newsletters he authored, he continuously railed against the “temporary” injunction that prohibited picketing La Casita, while brandishing support for the lettuce strike and boycott. However, by October he exhibited increased frustration, complaining bitterly about the treatment of Mexican Americans in the Valley and citing specific cases of anti-Mexican racism.<sup>44</sup> With little help from the union and unable to make any advances, Orendain’s newsletters gave the impression that he was idle and that Local 2 was ineffective. But in reality Orendain’s hands were tied, as there was simply nothing for him to do. In the November newsletter, he boasted that over 700 workers were paying dues “with the dream they would have a union in Texas” and that thousands more had signed authorization cards.<sup>45</sup> Had having a union in Texas become only a “dream” for the workers? Orendain thought so, unwittingly displaying increased frustration with the movement in general.

With his ability to make progress hamstrung, the rest of winter and the spring of the coming year were deafeningly quiet for Orendain. Chávez visited the Valley on February 8, 1971 to talk with his organizers and check on unionization progress, but his main purpose was to visit lettuce boycott councils in Houston and Austin.<sup>46</sup> On June 21 Chávez declared a boycott of Arizona table grapes,<sup>47</sup> a move that would ensure further delays to begin striking in the Valley. Orendain was forced to continue waiting and was still making no headway in organizing the Río Grande Valley farm workers. If Chávez had no

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<sup>44</sup> Orendain, “October Newsletter,” October 1970, Folder 8, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>45</sup> Orendain, “November Newsletter,” November 1970, Folder 8, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>46</sup> Clipping, “Chavez Visit to Valley Set,” *Valley Evening Monitor*, 15 January 1971, Folder 6, Box 6a, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>47</sup> “Fort Worth Boycott Newsletter,” 21 June 1971, Folder 10, Box 2, MFWC-UTA.

designs on organizing in the Valley, as he later claimed, it seems curious that he did not pull Orendain out, rather than leave him in Texas with the “dream” of an active union coming to fruition.

Thus 1971 passed quietly and uneventfully for Orendain, who still believed that Chávez would honor his pledge sometime in the future. Aside from the California-based union changing its name to the United Farm Workers (UFW) in February, things remained quiet until April of 1972. In an amusing incident, sixty picketers in Austin sympathetic to the union “invaded a \$100- [per] plate fund-raising dinner for Republican Senator John G. Tower,” a politician who was openly hostile to union efforts among Texas farm workers. Five of the picketers entered an elevator with the senator, peppering him with “embarrassing” questions concerning why he did not support the workers.<sup>48</sup> Though a moral victory, the incident did little to advance the cause of the workers.

In June 1972, William Lucey, Secretary-Treasurer of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSME), donated \$46,310 to the UFW to be used in the Arizona grape boycott. As Secretary-Treasurer of the union, Orendain was on hand to accept the donation at the organization’s conference in Phoenix:

As farmworkers, we still don’t have the right to put a price on the sweat of our brow, a right which should be sacred because it is the only one God has given us. So all we can do to thank brother William and his union is to say “may God bless you,” and to present him with one of our *huelga* flags, which represents all that we have struggled for during the past seven years.<sup>49</sup>

Three days after receiving the AFSME check, the “temporary” injunction against picketing La Casita was finally removed, and federal judges ruled that the Texas Rangers had used

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<sup>48</sup> Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 453; “Farm Worker Boycott of Republican Party Spreads,” *El Malcriado*, 28 April 1972, 10, NC-UTA.

<sup>49</sup> “AFSME Donates \$46,310 to La Causa,” *El Malcriado*, 23 June 1972, 7, NC-UTA.

“excessive force” against strikers in the summer of 1967. Charges pending against Orendain and other union members were also dropped.

Most revealing about the court’s decision was Orendain’s reaction to it. A ruling such as this should have been celebrated, but instead Orendain sounded jaded: “It’s kind of a surprise after six years. But I don’t feel good about it. My organization has been six years waiting on the results of justice. Some union members have already died.” In *El Malcriado*, Orendain said “the decision is quite a surprise to me; it has been such a long time. The decision brings us very little satisfaction.” He added that what was important after six years of struggle was that the union was “still present and growing stronger in the Rio Grande Valley.”<sup>50</sup> These were clearly not the words of a satisfied unionist. Although he qualified his remarks about the injunction, the recent events and being forced to wait for Chávez to help him had clearly increased his frustration.

One positive development in September 1972 was that construction of the union’s new headquarters in San Juan, *El Cuhamil*, was underway. The workers were themselves constructing the building during weekends and their spare time.<sup>51</sup> It would be over a year before the union would enjoy its new building, but for the time Orendain sounded hopeful. In October he announced another major organizing drive to commence in December. A health insurance plan, official newspaper, and the reestablishment of a farm worker service center were also being planned.<sup>52</sup> These were important developments, but the union still

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<sup>50</sup> Clipping, “La Casita Injunction Removal Seen,” *Corpus Christi Caller*, 27 June 1972, Folder 8, Box 8, MAFWM-UTA; “Law and Order Turns Against the Rich,” *El Malcriado*, 1 September 1972, 4, NC-UTA.

<sup>51</sup> “Construction of Cuhamil Continues,” *El Malcriado*, 1 September 1972, 4, NC-UTA. *El Cuhamil* was a Mexican-Indian term that referred to land that could only be worked by hand – applicable since the workers themselves were building the offices.

<sup>52</sup> “UFWOC in Texas,” *The Boycott Voice*, 28 October 1972, 2, Folder 6, Box 1, FWBC-UTA.

had made no headway or taken action against the growers since Orendain's return to the Valley in 1969. However, in October 1972 they made their first actual push to improve things for the workers. The U. S. Department of Agriculture had set aside 10,000 acres of land in Texas to be developed for sugar cane and the UFW submitted a proposal for collective bargaining and various workers' rights. The proposal was rejected and wages were set at \$1.85 for labor and \$2.10 for tractor and truck drivers. Orendain argued that "the wage of \$1.85 and \$2.10, although better wages than before, are still not just considering the fact that the government guarantees the grower a set premium price for the sugar cane."<sup>53</sup> Thus Orendain and the union soldiered on but as time kept passing still no gains were made.

By January 1973, *El Cuhamil* was finished and the first farm worker meeting had been held there the previous November, with between 450 to 500 workers present.<sup>54</sup> Clearly, despite the union's inability to strike, their organizing efforts at least had been effective and the workers were still showing interest in the union itself. It is also notable that despite union inaction in Texas the movement was still alive and well in California and Arizona. Violence was common – several strikers had been beaten up and frustrated growers were often turning to violence. For example, the UFW's co-op gas station near Delano had been bombed on January 17, 1973.<sup>55</sup> This again led Chávez to publicly reiterate the union's nonviolent stance in the face of such opposition.

In June 1973 Bill Chandler returned to Texas, but this time to direct the UFW's boycott from Dallas. New boycott offices were also opened in Fort Worth, Austin, and

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<sup>53</sup> Orendain, "UFWOC October Newsletter," October 1972, Oversize Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>54</sup> "El Cuhamil," *El Malcriado*, 26 January 1973, 5, NC-UTA.

<sup>55</sup> "Grower Violence Cannot Stop Our Movement," *El Malcriado*, 9 February 1973, 2, NC-UTA.

Houston<sup>56</sup> but no union members were sent to assist Orendain in the Valley, indicating Chávez still had no intention of “restarting” the Starr County strike. By this time, the Texas UFW was simply being ignored. As another uneventful summer passed, the UFW announced its first convention to take place on September 21 in Fresno, California, where such things as official policy, rules, and regulations would be discussed. Elections were also held for new officers, with the only major change being Gilbert Padilla’s election as Secretary-Treasurer, replacing Orendain.<sup>57</sup>

It is unclear why Orendain was voted out, but he may have been happy with the decision. He had always agreed with people who criticized him and said he was too uneducated for the position,<sup>58</sup> and now he would be free to spend all of his time organizing in the Río Grande Valley. The move succeeded in completely ostracizing Orendain from the rest of the union leadership and was probably applauded by Dolores Huerta and others, although it is unclear what Chávez felt. Nevertheless, the coming events that took place in 1975 indicated that Orendain might have purposefully been left out, but it is impossible to determine with any certainty.

In an article in *El Malcriado* in November 1973 that gave a “run down” of UFW activities in Texas, Orendain and the Río Grande Valley farm workers were completely ignored, as was the question of whether their cause would be revived.<sup>59</sup> Again, whether the union was purposefully ignoring Orendain is difficult to determine, but it seems odd that such an important part of the Texas branch of the union would be left out. With nothing

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<sup>56</sup> “New Texas Boycott Offices,” *El Malcriado*, 29 June 1973, 7, NC-UTA.

<sup>57</sup> “Convention Call,” *El Malcriado*, 21 September 1973, 7; “Presenting the National Executive Board,” *El Malcriado*, 19 October 1973, 8, both in NC-UTA.

<sup>58</sup> Orendain interview by Carr Winn, OHP-UTA.

<sup>59</sup> “Texas?” *El Malcriado*, 2 November 1973, 7, NC-UTA.

to do, in November Orendain agreed to participate in the Texas boycott of scab produce from California. After a brief picketing campaign covering twenty stores in the Río Grande Valley, including K-Mart, Kroger Family Center, and Globe, all agreed to not sell California scab produce. Orendain stated, “victories over these by picketing gave us a strong tool in negotiating with the other stores.”<sup>60</sup> But the victory was bittersweet, as the UFW clearly gave the grape and lettuce boycotts precedence over organizing and striking South Texas growers. Orendain and *his* cause were becoming increasingly alienated.

The boycott efforts intensified, and starting in December every weekend a group of 100-250 farm workers led by Orendain picketed 5 of the 13 area H.E.B. stores, also targeting Safeway. Thus December came and went, and the New Year dawned as uneventfully as ever for Orendain, followed by yet another year of inaction in the Valley. The movement struggled in California in 1974 as the UFW lost several contracts to the Teamsters. This caused rumors that the UFW had reached its demise, but Chávez refuted this, publicly arguing the union was alive and well.<sup>61</sup> The antagonism of the Teamsters occupied the UFW leader completely in 1974, as had an increased willingness by UFW picket captains in Arizona to use violence against strikebreakers.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Chávez’s ignoring of the Texas farm workers is explainable – he had to curtail violence and also win back the lost contracts. However, as Orendain waited idly by neither he nor Chávez realized what was about to happen in 1975. Orendain’s relationship with the UFW was about to completely unravel.

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<sup>60</sup> “Rio Grande Valley Boycott Advances,” *El Malcriado*, 16 November 1973, 8, NC-UTA.

<sup>61</sup> “Texas Agricultural Labor Relations Project,” Folder 8, Maria G. Flores Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter MGFP-UT); “Chavez Speaks on UFW Fight,” *El Malcriado*, January – February 1975, Section 1, 11, NC-UTA.

<sup>62</sup> Del Castillo and García, *Cesar Chavez*, 164-166.



In November 1974, Chávez reassigned Orendain to the boycott in Chicago. Orendain complied, reluctantly closing the office in San Juan and relocating to the Windy City. According to Orendain, orders were followed “to the tee,” but the farm workers of South Texas “continued to unite” and ask why he left.<sup>63</sup> While in Chicago, Orendain reassessed his priorities and whether his ideas fit well with UFW plans:

For three months I was evaluating myself, to see how much I wanted to belong to a big union, a great union...but I said, remember this great union a few years back was a very small union, and that was the time I joined the union. And now it's much bigger. And my services to the union come from what knowledge I have in organizing and trying to put people together. It's like if you have a tree – or myself, I compare myself to a cactus, a prickly pear cactus which gives a prickly fruit every year. At one time, in the beginning, those prickly pears were good, at the beginning of the union, that kind of fruit was good.

Then the union or someone in the union says that from now on they don't need prickly pears, they need apples or some other kind of fruit. But a tree never changes; all its life it's going to produce the same fruit, so I started thinking that if what I produce isn't good any more I will have to start thinking of doing something else, or of trying to give whatever fruit they need.<sup>64</sup>

After considering the situation and the pleas of the workers, it was clear to him the workers in Texas “wanted action [that] was being denied them without any explanation.” Thus, in January 1975 Orendain returned to the Valley to help the workers, against the wishes of Chávez.<sup>65</sup>

Orendain and Raquel had worked in “self-imposed exile” for the last eight years, and had too much invested in the cause of the Valley farm workers to abandon them. They believed they had waited long enough; Chávez's opinion was that it was “better not to tackle Texas again until the UFW had grown out of its infancy, and could concentrate its

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<sup>63</sup> Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005; Orendain, “Open Letter to Whomever Desires Justice for the Farm Workers,” 29 October 1975, Folder 15, MGFP-UT.

<sup>64</sup> Untitled interview of Orendain, Folder 12, MGFP-UT.

<sup>65</sup> Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005; Orendain, “Open Letter to Whomever Desires Justice for the Farm Workers,” 29 October 1975, Folder 15, MGFP-UT.

full attention on the valley.”<sup>66</sup> It was unclear to Orendain how a 13-year old union could still be in its “infancy” and he realized if he continued following Chávez’s direction the Texas workers would have no hope for a better future. Thus he gave up on Chávez and was tired of waiting – it was time to act alone.

However, for the time being he persisted under the auspices of the UFW. Without the blessing of Chávez, on May 19, 1975 Orendain and a small group of workers “began organizing a general strike in the melon harvest in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.” Orendain had a well-thought plan for the upcoming strike:

We don’t want to get tied down to one grower like we did in 1967. Our strength is that this time we have many more enemies and many more friends. I don’t think a strike in the valley is going to be won with a boycott. It takes too long and ties down too many people.

As one observer noted, ignoring a boycott was “heretical” to UFW strategy. By doing this, Orendain was showing his impatience with the union, not wanting to waste any more time waiting and planning. After starting the strike he wanted to continue it “on a hit and run basis,” and follow the delayed melon harvest through West Texas and into the Panhandle. Hopefully, this tactic would generate enough pressure on growers to lead to collective bargaining legislation.

Picketing began on May 20 and focused on La Casita, although it was initially unsuccessful in drawing workers from the fields. On May 26, most of the organizers, about 20 to 25, went to La Casita to picket. Orendain and two others went to the international bridge between Reynosa and Hidalgo, and using a bullhorn convinced a crowd of about 3,000 commuters not to go to work. Orendain and the union members were shocked at the

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<sup>66</sup> Bruce Cory, “La Huelga – 1975,” reprinted from *Texas Observer*, 20 June 1975, 1-2, in *La Voz Del Cuhamil*, 30 Junio 1975, 1, Oversize Box 8, MAFWM-UTA.

size of the crowd, and for a while did not know what to do with the 1,500 who remained at the bridge. Eventually, they decided to lead a march to nearby El Texano Ranch, with designs on convincing more workers to join the strike. Unfortunately, violence erupted – C.L. Miller, manager of El Texano, burst onto the scene and opened fire with a shotgun, wounding eleven but thankfully killing none. Details from the incident varied depending on who was asked: Orendain claimed “to the best of my knowledge, the organizers never strayed from a county road;” Miller argued that workers had thrown “rocks and melons” at his truck, and were trespassing on El Texano property. Either way, when the police arrived they told Miller he had the right to do what he did, and after a night in jail he was freed on \$15,000 bond and never convicted of a crime.<sup>67</sup>

Because of the shooting, the strike quickly ballooned to about 3,000 workers.<sup>68</sup> Area growers also united after the incident, forming a legal defense committee and requesting the use of the Texas Rangers, which was denied. However, the growers were determined to reap the melon crop, even if, as one manager from El Texano said, “there was a little blood on them.” Indeed, the violence continued. On May 29, a local rancher named Othol Brand drove through a crowd of strikers and rammed a pickup from which a union member was speaking through a bullhorn. The next day, unionist Armando Acosta was shot and nearly killed while driving near union headquarters in San Juan.

The strikers also reacted violently, and Orendain recognized he had a problem with unruliness: “Seventy-five percent of the strikers are from Reynosa, and they don’t worry so

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid; clipping, “10 Shot by Valley Farmer;” clipping, “Union Men Get Shot At,” *Valley Morning Star*, 29 May 1975; clipping, “Police Escort Melons Past Protesters,” *Corpus Christi Caller*, 29 May 1975, all in Folder 16, MGFP-UT.

<sup>68</sup> Douglas Kellar, “A Brief History of the Texas Farmworkers Union,” Folder 8, MGFP-UT.

much about breaking the law over there. They give our picket captains a hard time.” Reynosa was across the border and laws were much more sympathetic to workers there than in Texas. Also, a militant Chicano group called the Brown Berets was providing unsolicited “help” to Orendain’s efforts and acted violently in some circumstances.<sup>69</sup>

The Miller shooting appalled Chávez, but he was also appalled that violence was happening in the name of the UFW. In late May 1975, Walter Cronkite delivered a story on the evening news concerning UFW members using violence against non-union workers in the Valley. Chávez gave Orendain a tongue-lashing, saying, “it is the most sickening show of farm workers carrying out violent acts against other workers we have seen in our history. We cannot and will not support these kinds of actions.”<sup>70</sup> Clearly, Orendain’s association with the union was tenuous, but this is unfortunate – never had he condoned or ordered violence, and perhaps if Chávez became involved with the strike his influence could have curtailed it. Nevertheless, Orendain took a bold risk in striking on his own and was willing to pay the price.

Shortly after the shooting, 400 union members gathered on the road outside of El Texano and blocked several trucks carrying melons for over two hours. Upon arrival Orendain broke the demonstration up, as he had not sanctioned the event. He witnessed strikers beat on the trucks as they passed, and hoped to curtail more violence.<sup>71</sup> The union leader was trying to regain control of events.

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<sup>69</sup> Bruce Cory, “La Huelga – 1975,” reprinted from *Texas Observer*, 20 June 1975, 1-2, in *La Voz Del Cuhamil*, 30 Junio 1975, 1, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>70</sup> Chávez to Orendain, 28 May 1975, Folder 9, Box 1, MFWC-UTA.

<sup>71</sup> “Police Escort Melons Past Protestors,” *Corpus Christi Caller*, 29 May 1975, Folder 16, MGFP-UT.

Events had indeed gotten out of hand, and calls for nonviolence were made from many quarters. On June 1, a Catholic priest delivering mass in Hidalgo for 600 union sympathizers called for nonviolence from both sides. The next day, attorneys for the union and La Casita reached an agreement allowing for peaceful picketing on public roads near farm property. Orendain was questioned on the legality of picketing tactics and each side established the rules for demonstrations.<sup>72</sup> On June 5 Orendain called for a candlelight vigil outside of Griffin-Brand Farms in McAllen to dramatize the union's quest for elections and to promote nonviolence.<sup>73</sup>

Also in June 1975, Hidalgo County judges announced they were considering worker elections to determine the popularity of unionism in the Valley. Orendain rejected the idea, fearing the judges were corrupt and would falsify election records.<sup>74</sup> The judges were not the only ones accused of corruption. In early June Orendain authored a press release charging a conspiracy among "the sheriff's department, justices of the peace, and other law enforcement personnel to deprive farm workers of access to the courts." He also accused the sheriff's department of staking out union headquarters, following union members, unlawful questioning, abuse of arrested strikers, and he accused local judges of refusing to accept written complaints of unlawful activity perpetrated against the union.<sup>75</sup>

Despite these setbacks Orendain vowed to keep the strike alive through August. On June 12 he spoke at an Austin Friends of the Farm Workers Meeting, where he stated

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<sup>72</sup> Clipping, "UFW Changes Strategy in Dispute," *Dallas Morning News*, 2 June 1975; clipping, "Peaceful Picketing OK'd for Farm Workers' Union," 3 June 1975, both in Folder 6, Box 7, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>73</sup> Clipping, "Growers Organizing as UFW Plans Vigil," *Dallas Morning News*, 6 June 1975, Folder 6, Box 7, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>74</sup> Clipping, "Union Vote Decision Dues," *Dallas Morning News*, 8 June 1975, Folder 6, Box 7, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>75</sup> Press Release, 5-13 June 1975, Folder 15, MGFP-UT.

the union would follow the workers on the cantaloupe harvest north, hopefully building enough support to “push for legislation.” He stated that all union activities would be nonviolent and the greatest accomplishment of the union in recent weeks was that it had become more disciplined, he said, ensuring that strikers would obey his and the other picket captains’ directions as they traveled north.<sup>76</sup>

Before leaving, Orendain crossed the Mexican border and held a successful rally in Ojinaga, where he convinced over 300 workers not to commute to the Spencer Brothers’ Packing Shed in Presidio, Texas. The dramatic event unfolded quickly:

The one-day strike involved undocumented workers who comprise 90 percent of the labor force in the 500-acre cantaloupe county of Presidio. Because of the large labor supply available to the growers, workers are paid as little as .60 to .70 cents an hour, far below the federal minimum wage of \$1.80. Texas migrant workers are refused because they cannot compete with the Mexican workers for such a low wage. In 1974, the melon harvest brought in a \$622,250 profit for the growers.

The Ojinaga workers usually crossed “at a midway point on the international bridges or at three major river passages between 3 and 6 a.m. to avoid detention by U.S. authorities.” To combat this, on July 7 at 4 a.m. “Orendain and his organizers stationed themselves at one of three river crossings on a railroad trestle and waited before a few workers joined the strike.” After two hours the crowd ballooned to “200-250 workers, 20 percent of whom were between the ages 10 and 16.” Orendain gave a speech on the general goals of bargaining and better wages before he was stopped by Mexican federal troops, escorted to the border and told not to return.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Paul Blankenmeister, “Strike to Continue – Orendain,” *Daily Texan*, 13 June 1975, Folder 16, MGFP-UT.

<sup>77</sup> “UFW Ojinaga,” Folder 1, MGFP-UT.

This was the greatest show of solidarity by Mexican workers who supported the strike. Plans for the event had been publicized in Ojinaga's weekly, *El Centinela*, which explained what the UFW was doing in the Valley. The week prior Orendain had met with and received the endorsement of Ojinaga mayor Ernesto Pablano, and Ramon Ruiz, chief of immigration, to conduct a peaceful, three-day demonstration. Thus careful planning explains the high turnout, but also the preparedness of Mexican officials.

As Orendain was being escorted back across the border, a UFW organizer successfully convinced 100 workers to leave the cantaloupe fields of Presidio. Workers there had struck on July 6 for \$1.00 an hour, and after being promised that wage returned to the fields, only to find their pay raise at .70 cents an hour. Orendain arrived in Presidio at noon and found "sheriffs, FBI, and Texas Rangers" on the scene and ready for trouble. County sheriff Buddy Harris threatened him, saying "'there was not one foot' of public property in Presidio and picketers were fully liable to be shot by growers and would be arrested in any event." Orendain thus pulled the strikers out of the area, saying, "we're not going to give the law the chance to destroy us." Thankfully, no violence occurred, and Orendain decided to shift the strike to Pecos and Reeves Counties.<sup>78</sup>

After leaving Presidio Orendain and the union officials arrived in Pecos that evening, urging workers to join the movement. According to Orendain, efforts in Pecos would be "peaceful and within the framework of the law."<sup>79</sup> Work stoppages were achieved, as well as further north in Muleshoe. During these strikes Orendain heard that

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Clipping, "Farm Worker Organizers to Try Pecos," *El Paso Times*, 9 July 1975, Folder 16, MGFP-UT.

growers back in Presidio began paying workers \$1.25 an hour, double what they were getting just a few days before. Thus union efforts appeared to be working.

All the while, the UFW leadership's opinion of the strike vacillated from approval to disapproval. Chávez had been upset with Orendain for disobeying his direction, and the chiding he gave Orendain in late May 1975 for violent activity made his opinion clear. Interestingly, despite Chávez's disapproval, Orendain claimed, "at first the UFW gave its approval to the Texas melon strike and organizing efforts." In early June Gilbert Padilla had visited the Valley and during an interview on local television voiced UFW support for Orendain's efforts. Union hierarchy could not agree on whether to support the strike.

However, during the Pecos campaign Chávez's obstinate stance prevailed. Bill Chandler, who was still directing the Texas boycott from Fort Worth, began circulating "malicious lies about the organizing efforts of Orendain, and had been discouraging long-time UFW supporters from sending any form of financial aid" to support Orendain's "faction."<sup>80</sup> In one of these letters, Chandler claimed that Orendain "left the staff of the UFW" in January and was working on his own, without "the sanction of the UFW led by Cesar Chavez." He also maintained that the strikers were in no way affiliated with the UFW and did not believe in the philosophy of nonviolence. This last comment was unfortunately untrue. Yes, he had problems with violent strikers but Orendain condemned their actions, similar to the way Chávez condemned violence by UFW members in Arizona in 1974. Chandler also stated that Chávez was intensifying efforts in California and that the UFW was not prepared to deal with Texas until lost union contracts in California were "won back. We believe that farmworker interests nationwide will be best served if such

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<sup>80</sup> Douglas Kellar, "A Brief History of the Texas Farmworkers Union," Folder 8, MGFP-UT.



action as Orendain has shown is kept to a minimum while the entire union works toward the central goal.”<sup>81</sup>

Thus the UFW condemned Orendain and the Río Grande Valley farm workers. In August, Harry Hubbard, President of the Texas AFL-CIO, openly attacked Orendain and his followers. Orendain’s association with the UFW simply could not continue.<sup>82</sup> However, Orendain released a statement clarifying his and Local 2’s dedication to nonviolence and the pursuit of the justice for the Río Grande Valley farm workers:

We the farm workers of Texas will continue to hold strikes, demonstrations, marches, and non-violent protests, to in this way attract the attention of all the citizens of the state as well as that of all the country and the world, because if this country, the champion of democracies and example for all free countries in the world, allows these injustices to exist within its system, it only makes it very obvious that it doesn’t practice what it preaches and that there is a great deal of corruption in the great system of “free enterprise.” For these reasons and for many more that we could go on naming forever, we the farm workers of Texas ask every human being who is a citizen of Texas and sincerely concerned about justice for the man or woman who has to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, help us obtain these goals, the first of which is that the Texas Legislature pass [collective bargaining] laws, the same as or better than that of California, for Texas.<sup>83</sup>

Unfortunately, his impassioned declaration did little to curb coming events. His fate was sealed when in early August when CBS “aired a report showing strikers heaving melons and rocks at non-striking farmworkers [sic],” contradicting Orendain’s alleged dedication to nonviolence. Chávez, who saw the report, “placed an irate call to Orendain. Arguments over tactics denigrated into ego clashes,” and each became extremely angry.<sup>84</sup> When the telephone yelling match ended, each man hung up, not realizing they would never speak

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<sup>81</sup> Chandler to UFW Supporters, Folder 10, MGFP-UT.

<sup>82</sup> Douglas Kellar, “A Brief History of the Texas Farmworkers Union,” Folder 8, MGFP-UT.

<sup>83</sup> Orendain, “Union de Campesinos General Offices,” 16 July 1975, Folder 11, MGFP-UT.

<sup>84</sup> Steve Russell, “Getting Organized in the Valley,” *Texas Observer*, 3 February 1978, 18-19, Folder 5, MGFP-UT.

again. Orendain's association with Chávez was finished, and it was time for him to officially step out on his own.

Who was to blame for the falling out? In Orendain's defense, he had waited six long years for the "go-ahead" from Chávez, which by January of 1975 he realized was never coming. Anyone who knew Orendain was amazed someone so headstrong had been as patient as he had been. Was he wrong to act without Chávez? Surely the strike would have been stronger if he could have waited for the full support of the UFW; since his association with the union was finished, acting without its and the AFL-CIO's support would prove difficult. But he was dedicated to the cause in Texas and Chávez could have done something to harness his enthusiasm and keep him under control. In Chávez's defense, although he went back on his promise of 1969 by declaring the lettuce and Arizona strikes in 1970, the UFW was still working hard in California. The smear campaign started by Chandler in the summer of 1975 only made things worse. Perhaps the UFW could have supported Orendain in gaining control of the strikers and curtailing violence from the Reynosa workers. Why they chose instead to just slander and ostracize him is a mystery, and seems to belie the "unity" of the farm workers' movement. The UFW clearly would have been happy to drive Orendain out of business. Nevertheless, in August of 1975, Orendain's designs on organizing and achieving collective bargaining for Texas farm workers were alive and well, and would continue in the years to come.

## CHAPTER 4

### ORENDAIN MARCHES ON

On August 14, 1975, Antonio Orendain established the independent Texas Farm Workers' Union (TFW), officially severing his ties with Chávez and the UFW.<sup>1</sup> The TFW immediately intensified its campaign in Pecos, and also won a victory in Saragoza, a small West Texas town where local farm workers voted overwhelmingly to be represented by the union. The TFW also announced plans to organize Valley citrus workers in the fall, which so far had been excluded from the then 3-month old strike.<sup>2</sup>

Orendain felt that by establishing the TFW he kept himself dedicated to the Texas workers, whom the UFW had forgotten. In his mind, the “mother union” had abandoned its original purpose:

[Orendain] speaks regretfully of his break with Chavez, suggesting that his old friend has lost touch with the people. “You get a balloon and put someone’s name on it,” he said recently, “and you blow it up and up it goes into the air. You tell everybody that’s my balloon, but after a while it gets so high up there, what good does it do you?”<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, although the TFW was an independent union it did little to establish a separate image from the UFW. *Huelga* flags and the UFW black eagle were still used in demonstrations and the official TFW newspaper, *El Cuhamil*, reported on the activities of the UFW. Orendain also emphasized that the union was acting independently not because

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<sup>1</sup> Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005; Gómez-Quirón, *Mexican-American Labor*, 256.

<sup>2</sup> “Pecos Awakened by Huelgistas;” “TFW Win Farm Worker Elections;” “TFW Investigates Valley Citrus,” all in *El Cuhamil*, 29 August 1975. 1-2, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>3</sup> Joe Holley, “The Texas Farmworkers’ Split,” *Texas Observer*, 17 April 1981, 6.

they wanted to compete with the UFW but because it was their responsibility to press for the rights of farm workers in Texas.<sup>4</sup>

By late September 1975 the citrus strike began in Mission, Texas. On the 29<sup>th</sup>, twenty full-time workers at Sharyland Farms walked off their jobs under direction of the TFW, to protest low wages and unbearable working conditions.<sup>5</sup> Abuse of the workers was common. One worker, Guadalupe Barbarosa, recalled an incident where he had broken his finger while working, was taken to the hospital, and returned to work one hour later under threat of losing his job. Another man was only allowed two days rest after breaking his hand. Upon arrival on any given day, Sharyland workers were not allowed to leave and if necessity forced them to, they would not be allowed to return that day or the following two. The average Sharyland worker worked 50-52 hours per week and earned about \$89.<sup>6</sup>

Chávez remained obstinate concerning Orendain and the TFW, emphasizing the preeminent importance of UFW activities in California “because of the present criticalness of the elections [to win back contracts the union had lost to the Teamsters].” Chandler, however, seemed to vacillate between opposing the TFW and supporting them. On October 4, the Texas director for the UFW spoke at an Austin Friends of the Farm Workers meeting, saying he “spiritually was in support of the Texas farm worker unionizing efforts.” Despite this, Chávez and the UFW officially remained opposed.

On October 10 officials from the Texas Employment Commission visited El Cuhamil to discuss the Special Unemployment Act, which covered farm workers. Not

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<sup>4</sup> “UFW After Gallo,” Orendain, “Responsibility Not Competition,” both in *El Cuhamil*, 29 August 1975, 2-3, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>5</sup> *Comunidad*, February 1976, Folder 10, Box 2, MFWC-UTA.

<sup>6</sup> “Hombres En Lucha,” *El Cuhamil*, 20 October 1975, 3, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

previously covered under any federal unemployment program, farm workers could apply for aid under this new bill.<sup>7</sup> Thus strides were being made, though the collective bargaining legislation Orendain was fighting for remained a fleeting hope.

On October 22 three TFW organizers, Benigo Peña, José Salazar, and Lydia Espinoza, began a three-day fast “to protest the denial of democratic rights to farm workers in the Rio Grande Valley.” Orendain was silent on the issue,<sup>8</sup> and it was unclear whether he supported this symbolic act. A few days later, he issued an “open letter to whomever desires justice for the farm workers,” hoping to clarify his union’s relationship with the UFW. Orendain stated that despite recent confusion the TFW did “not have the blessings nor the sanction of the executive board of the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO.” He further clarified that “even though we do not have the official backing of the AFL-CIO, this does not mean that none of them support us. For we do have a number of union locals and members who are mailing us donations...without the authority of their ‘Masters.’”

Orendain further explained that he did not “at the present time” expect contracts to be signed with the TFW. Instead, he hoped the demonstrations would force the Texas legislature to pass a collective bargaining law similar to what the UFW had achieved for California workers. Then, “we will decide if we will compete [with] or help the UFW acquire contracts from Texas employers for the Texas farm workers.” Thus, at this stage Orendain had not ruled out the possibility of future cooperation with the UFW. The sought-after law was most important because if the TFW achieved contracts and then lost

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<sup>7</sup> “Austin Supports Farm Workers;” “Unemployment for Farm Workers,” both in *El Cuhamil*, 20 October 1975, 3, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>8</sup> Press Release, 23 October 1975, Folder 15, MGFP-UT.

them – as the UFW had done in California – then there would be legislation to protect the rights of the workers no matter which organization represented them.<sup>9</sup>

With their intentions clarified, the TFW continued demonstrating. On October 24, 1975, a rally was held on the University of Texas at Austin campus to demonstrate against Allen Shivers, UT Board of Regents member and owner of Sharyland Farms. Not only using the occasion to embarrass Shivers and push for legislation, the union also collected \$500 in donations at the rally and several TFW organizers gave impassioned speeches.<sup>10</sup> In November, employees at a McAllen convenience store verbally abused a unionist who asked why they were selling non-union (UFW) lettuce and grapes. In protest, over 100 union members gathered a few days later and picketed the store. During the protest, some store employees began racing around the strikers at high speeds in their cars “while intimidating the children and mothers present at the protest.” After the owner of the store promised to clear his shelves of scab produce, the picketers moved on to another store whose owner was publicly hostile to the movement. No concessions were made there, but an unidentified customer offered his services, those of his friends, and their German Shepherds “to clear the parking lot of ‘those dirty wetbacks.’”<sup>11</sup>

Efforts continued through the end of November and early December, but rather quietly. On December 1 the union began a weekly article in its newspaper called “Saturday’s Child,” which exposed the abuse of child labor by Valley-area growers. The

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<sup>9</sup> Orendain, “Open Letter to Whomever Desires Justice for the Farm Workers,” 29 October 1975, Folder 15, MGFP-UT.

<sup>10</sup> “Farm Workers – Students Unite!” *El Cuhamil*, 8 November 1975, 1, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>11</sup> “Valley Boycott Continues,” *El Cuhamil*, 8 November 1975, 4, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

Austin Friends of the Farm Workers continued working on behalf of the union, raising money and collecting food. This group was the only organization openly supporting both the UFW and TFW in Texas, and they were invaluable to Orendain, who stated the TFW was “struggling to survive in order to continue its efforts.”<sup>12</sup>

By the end of 1975, Orendain was actively pursuing his plan of “paving the way” for Chávez and the UFW for when they decided to organize in Texas. On December 23, Orendain sent a telegram to Chávez requesting the UFW leader give an audience to a delegation from the TFW at the upcoming UFW board meeting. The purpose of the proposed meeting was a local affiliation for the TFW with the UFW. Unfortunately, Chávez denied Orendain an audience, but three days later he received a symbolic response.<sup>13</sup>

During this time Orendain worked from his office in San Juan, which technically was UFW property, although the Texas farm workers had built the structure “with their own hands.” Earlier in December, a UFW attorney at the office “drew up and began circulating a petition which denounced the Texas farm workers and Orendain, and demanded their immediate removal from *El Cuhamil*.”<sup>14</sup> Why they took so long to evict Orendain is unknown, but in late December Gilbert Padilla visited the UFW offices and left a three-person committee to “assist Tony [Orendain] in moving out by the 15<sup>th</sup> of February.”<sup>15</sup> Padilla also left a list of demands for Orendain, including that the TFW cease

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<sup>12</sup> “Saturday’s Child,” *El Cuhamil*, 1 December 1975, 2, 4, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>13</sup> Orendain, Jesus F. Luna, and Armando Acosta to Chávez, 23 December 1975, Folder 8, MGFP-UT.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Kellar, “A Brief History of the Texas Farm Workers’ Union,” Folder 8, MGFP-UT.

<sup>15</sup> James C. Harrington to Jerry Cohen, 26 December 1975, Folder 8, MGFP-UT.

using the UFW black eagle. “An ugly confrontation” appeared to be in the making.<sup>16</sup>

By late January 1976, the dispute over the building gained media attention. Orendain “publicly accused UFW leaders of trying to undermine the fledgling Texas Farm Workers’ Union,” but “UFW spokesmen quickly denied the allegations [as] the walls of secrecy around the familial debate came tumbling down.” This would be the first of many times Orendain accused Chávez and the UFW of sabotaging his efforts. An article appearing in a local newspaper recognized the dispute over the office space, but also that the feud ran much deeper:

On the surface the dispute centers around Orendain’s refusal to abandon his office and meeting space in the union hall and the alleged hostility between and interference of UFW personnel in TFW business. Deeper than this, are basic philosophical and strategical differences between the two unions. The UFW is not yet ready to tackle the valley’s powerful agri-business employers, choosing instead to build a following by providing social services to local farm workers. Orendain, however, says the farm workers are willing to strike, to disrupt harvesting and to force growers to negotiate union contracts.

The article further outlined Orendain’s plans, that he did not want to compete with the UFW “but to aid it by doing those things [they] would not do. We are preparing the ground so if the UFW comes in here, they will not have the same experience as in California.” Orendain also stated he would not leave *El Cubamil*, which was “for the farm worker in general, the farm worker of Texas, not a select group.” Rebecca Harrington, a UFW representative at the office, countered this by saying “when he became independent, he lost all rights of staying here.” The article closed by saying that “despite the ever-

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<sup>16</sup> Douglas Kellar, “A Brief History of the Texas Farm Workers’ Union,” Folder 8, MGFP-UT.



widening chasm between the two unions, Orendain was not ruling out the possibility of a re-merger sometime in the future.”<sup>17</sup>

TFW activities did not cease despite the coming confrontation with the UFW. On January 12, 1976 a general strike began against Valley citrus growers and hundreds of workers walked off the job, reflecting the “significant and widespread support for” the TFW. The strike began when five TFW organizers went to the international bridge at Hidalgo and convinced 25 workers to strike. Through the rest of January organizers went daily to the bridge and convinced about 75 workers per day to join their ranks. By early February, the strike had ballooned to about 2,000 workers.<sup>18</sup>

In late January, Orendain led another large demonstration on the international bridge at Hidalgo, protesting Governor Dolph Briscoe’s obstinate stance towards the farm workers and the inability of the Governor of Tamaulipas, Mexico to “remedy the problems of his state.”<sup>19</sup> The event was planned because Briscoe was to be honored at the annual Mission Citrus Festival, and Governor Cárdenas-González of Tamaulipas was invited as a guest. The two were supposed to meet in the middle of the bridge, but because of TFW pickets Briscoe refused to come to the bridge, forcing Cárdenas-González to cross alone. As the Mexican Governor crossed, picketers walked alongside him and convinced him to stop and listen to their complaints. After a few minutes, the Governor promised to raise the workers’ issues with Briscoe later that day. The two men breakfasted at the Catholic

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<sup>17</sup> Clipping, Michael Walsh, “Farm Workers: Storm Brewing in the Valley,” *Corpus Christi Caller*, 25 January 1976, 1D-2D, Folder 8, MGFP-UT; Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Clipping, Paula Waddle, “Farmworker Support Needed,” *Daily Texan*, 29 January 1976, Folder 17, MGFP-UT; “2000 Support Strike,” *El Cuhamil*, 6 February 1976, 2, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>19</sup> Press Release, 31 January 1976, Folder 15, MGFP-UT.

Veterans' Center in Mission, where the union continued its protest, unsuccessful in gaining an audience with either man for the rest of the day.

Also, because of the union's presence the local media refused to cover the event. Two local television stations, KGBT and KRGV, turned their cameras off when the picketers arrived and the reporter from KRGV even refused Orendain's press release. Orendain accused local officials of prompting a "news blackout" in the local media, and claimed local newspapers also refused to cover union activities. Orendain feared this blackout would be a serious setback, and the union would have to find ways to garner media attention of future demonstrations and protests. His main concern was that a media black out would de-emphasize the nonviolent nature of their efforts. Since the only farm worker news being covered locally was the growing feud between the two unions, Orendain knew this could prove detrimental to the TFW's image.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile the February 15 deadline the UFW gave Orendain to vacate *El Cuhamil* was approaching. As the date neared, "it became quite obvious that the people who constructed El Cuhamil," the Texas farm workers, "had no intention of leaving it," and that "an ugly confrontation was in the making." It was rumored that Rebecca Harrington would call the police to forcefully evict the TFW if they refused to leave. However, Orendain and the TFW "were prepared to counter with a mass occupation of the building" to demonstrate their intention to stay. As the deadline neared the "Harrington faction" backed down, realizing that the ensuing feud would be bad publicity for the UFW.

After the incident, Harrington publicly denied the UFW had ever given Orendain a deadline to leave, not realizing that the TFW had a signed copy of Padilla's memo ordering

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<sup>20</sup> "Governors Meet," *El Cuhamil*, 6 February 1976, 4, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

her to do so. Why had the “Harrington faction” suddenly backed down? It was rumored that the upper echelons of the UFW wanted to avoid a public confrontation with Orendain and the TFW, as it would have created bad publicity. Padilla turned on Harrington and blamed her for providing inextricable links between the UFW and the eviction plans, despite the fact that he had signed the original list that included the eviction notice. It is unclear what Chávez thought of this whole process, but presumably he was behind the effort to de-publicize the incident. Nevertheless, the TFW stayed in the building, victorious over the UFW’s attempt to “sabotage” their efforts.<sup>21</sup>

In February 1976 Orendain began looking for a new building, sardonically saying he wanted to honor the UFW’s claim to its “private property.” Because of demonstrations where union members’ lives were threatened for trespassing, Orendain concluded, “in a ‘free enterprise’ system private property has more worth than the life or liberty of a human being.” So, abandoning *El Cuhamil*, which the farm workers so diligently built, was his way of taking the moral high ground.<sup>22</sup> Orendain outlined these plans at a fund-raising cocktail party given by the support group in Austin, where he also gave a speech concerning the need for union elections among farm workers. Over \$1,000 in donations was collected for the union at the event – a considerable sum, considering the TFW was perpetually broke.<sup>23</sup>

The citrus strike continued, and the TFW was again threatened with violence. On February 17 a grower’s wife at an orchard in Mission threatened to shoot demonstrators, and likewise the same day a local grower boasted of the sheriff’s promise to provide him

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<sup>21</sup> Douglas Kellar, “A Brief History of the Texas Farm Workers’ Union,” Folder 8, MGFP-UT.

<sup>22</sup> “TFW: Still Struggling,” Orendain, “Private Property,” both in *El Cuhamil*, 27 February 1976, 2, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>23</sup> “Support Continues,” *El Cuhamil*, 27 February 1976, 4, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

one month's worth of shotgun shells to use against union members who dared trespass on his property.<sup>24</sup> Thankfully no violence occurred, and in fact, there were no publicized instances of union members committing violence since the previous August. This indicates that Orendain was finally able to control the more militant ranks of the TFW, meaning the Mexican workers and the Brown Berets. That they did not react violently to being threatened also indicates this and belies the UFW's constant accusations that Orendain condoned violent behavior. Clearly, the TFW leader had gained better control of his fledgling union than he had initially enjoyed.

The controversy over *El Cuhamil* flared again in March. Instead of attacking the entire TFW as before, this time the local UFW focused on Orendain. Orendain was living on the property in a mobile home, which the UFW ordered him to move. A UFW spokesperson stated "the UFW had deliberately refused to comment on Orendain's separation over the last nine months in an effort to avoid interfering with him or his future plans." However, the UFW changed its mind:

The personal attacks and gross misstatements against local and national UFW leaders, which have been consistently and carefully orchestrated by Orendain, finally moved the *local* (emphasis added) UFW people to make a public statement. During the last two months, Orendain has spent considerable time and energy attacking UFW members in the state and local media, particularly in San Antonio, Austin, and Houston.

Another local UFW spokesperson claimed "last December Orendain agreed to move to another location by February 15," and when he claimed he could not make the deadline the

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<sup>24</sup> "Strike Pressure Hits Growers," *El Cuhamil*, 27 February 1976, 1-2, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

UFW graciously extended it to March 15. Notably, “no one else has been asked to relocate.” Only Orendain was being forced to leave.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, the local UFW had a vendetta against Orendain. It is difficult to establish what Chávez thought of thought, as the UFW leader was increasingly reticent concerning his wayward former Secretary-Treasurer. He might have disapproved of the public nature of the dispute, as it did seem to amplify divisiveness within the farm workers’ movement. Nevertheless, it is difficult to establish which of Orendain’s comments the UFW was taking offense to. Since establishing the TFW, he consistently argued that he was “paving the way” for the UFW to take over in the Valley and in late December even sought an affiliation with the union. Thus, it seems unlikely that he would purposefully “slander” UFW members. Also, the charge that “last December Orendain agreed to move to another location by February 15” is simply not true. Never had Orendain or any TFW member stated they were leaving the compound; on the contrary, there were quite emphatic about staying.

Orendain and the TFW issued a response to the UFW’s orders. The TFW argued that if the UFW wanted Orendain off the property so badly, why was the directive not coming from card-carrying UFW members? Orendain charged that the “Harrington clique” was acting independently of the UFW leadership, and that none of them had the written authorization of Chávez to kick him out.<sup>26</sup> In fact, neither Jim Harrington nor his

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<sup>25</sup> Clipping, “UFW Confirms Orendain Has Been Asked to Leave Center,” *Monitor*, 12 March 1976; clipping, “Orendain Told Mobile Home Must be Moved,” *Corpus Christi Caller*, 13 March 1976, 4B, both in Folder 8, MGFP-UT.

<sup>26</sup> “TFW Statement,” *El Cuhamil*, 20 March 1976, 1, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

wife were official UFW members, they were only volunteers. Douglas Kellar, Secretary-Treasurer of the TFW, argued that the Harringtons wanted to relocate to Delano and were invited to work full-time for the UFW by union attorney Jerry Cohen – thus, kicking Orendain out of *El Cuhamil* “would be a very big feather in Mr. Harrington’s cap when he arrives in California to work for his new bosses.”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately for the Harringtons, Orendain simply would not leave.

The citrus harvest ended in March 1976 and Orendain and the union began looking ahead to strike activities during for the upcoming melon harvest. Though no significant gains were made during the citrus strike the union enjoyed widespread support from the workers.<sup>28</sup> Orendain also grew more hopeful about politics, applauding the efforts of a newly elected county judge in Crystal City – José Ángel Gutiérrez – as a Mexican American who was working to readjust the Anglo-dominated political system of South Texas.<sup>29</sup> Political action combined with the strike might force legislation to be passed in Austin.

The job outlook for the coming summer of 1976 was not good for the workers. Early reports stated that demands for farm work would be very slim in the north, while in Texas farm worker wages, when one could find work, were only \$1.70 per hour, an increase from previous years but still only about half what workers were making in California.<sup>30</sup> Residents of the Valley’s *colonias* (shantytowns that farm workers and their families lived in) took action into their own hands. On April 16, 200 residents of Colonia

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<sup>27</sup> Douglas Kellar, “A Brief History of the Texas Farm Workers’ Union,” James C. Harrington to Jerry Cohen, 26 December 1975, both in Folder 8, MGFP-UT.

<sup>28</sup> Orendain, “Strikes Never End,” *El Cuhamil*, 20 March 1976, 2, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>29</sup> Orendain, “Crystal City,” *El Cuhamil*, 20 March 1976, 2, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>30</sup> “Don’t Go North Yet;” “What About Texas?,” both in *El Cuhamil*, 20 March 1976, 4, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

Cameron Park outside of Brownsville demonstrated and demanded Cameron County “do something about the living conditions and lack of basic facilities at the *Colonia*.” Their main demand was that the county provide them drinking water, paved roads, and sewage disposal facilities, none of which they had.<sup>31</sup>

Demonstrations such as those by the *colonia* residents and the efforts of young, militant organizers such as Gutiérrez would hopefully buoy Orendain’s efforts at winning justice for the farm workers. Lacking the support of Chávez and the AFL-CIO, the TFW needed all the support it could get, especially since opposition to the union was as vehement as ever. Possibly in anticipation of the upcoming melon strike, on April 23, 1976, two pickup trucks drove by *El Cuhamil* and fired several shotgun blasts into the building while it was full of people.<sup>32</sup> Thankfully, no one was injured but the incident indicated that locals would again try to intimidate Orendain and the union into submission.

With the beginning of “Farm Worker Week,” May 2-8, 1976, the Río Grande Valley farm workers were “ready to rededicate themselves...and regenerate the cry and commitment for justice” by opening a new melon strike in the Valley.<sup>33</sup> Officially beginning at a rally in Hidalgo on May 16, the union announced it would “focus its strike activities against three of the largest melon growers in the Valley – Griffen and Brand, El Texano Ranch, and La Casita Farms.” They also appealed to Mexican workers from Reynosa to not break the strike.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Colonia Residents Demand; Water, Streets!” *El Cuhamil*, 29 April 1976, 1, 3, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>32</sup> “Open Season on Black Eagles,” *El Cuhamil*, 29 April 1976, 4, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>33</sup> Clipping, Ricardo Parra, “Farm Labor Organizations,” *El Renacimiento*, 26 April 1976, 2, Folder 11, MGFP-UT.

<sup>34</sup> “Melon Strike Begins,” *El Cuhamil*, 20 May 1976, 1, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

A violent local reaction soon followed. On May 31, a small-caliber gun was fired at a picket line in Weslaco. One shot was fired directly at a striker's wife sitting in a pickup truck, damaging the windshield but fortunately missing the woman. Thankfully no one else was hurt, but when Hidalgo Deputy Sheriff Marry Colwell was called in to investigate the bullets used, he said the shots might have come from local "rabbit hunters." Actually, just before the shooting, the picketed grower's wife marked her property line off and threatened to shoot anyone who crossed. The union was picketing her husband for using dangerous pesticides, driving large trucks through the fields, and abusing child labor.<sup>35</sup> The incident marked the one-year anniversary of C.L. Miller's declaration of "open season" on farm workers at El Texano Ranch.

Pickets continued into June, with demonstrators visiting up to three or four fields per day. The melon strike spread into the tomato fields, but as the end of June approached the harvest for both of these crops was well underway. Thus, as he did the previous year, Orendain planned to move the strike north and then west to follow the delayed harvest season into other parts of Texas. A group of thirty was to leave in the third week of June for Zavala and Uvalde Counties, subsequently traveling to Presidio, Pecos and Reeves Counties, and ending in Muleshoe. Emphasis was to be on organizing the workers to perform their own strikes, with only "help and advice" coming from the TFW.<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately for the union in a June 5 election run-off Brig Marmalejo was elected Hidalgo County Sheriff, promising to be less receptive to the farm workers than his defeated opponent, incumbent Claudio Castaneda, had allegedly been. He said that such

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<sup>35</sup> "Sniping Incident Laid to 'Rabbit Hunters!'" *El Cuhamil*, 4 June 1976, 1, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>36</sup> "Strikes Go North," *El Cuhamil*, 25 June 1976, 1, 5, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.



favoritism had made it “necessary” for growers like C.L. Miller “to take the law into their own hands.” Contributions to Marmalejo’s campaign were twice that of his opponent, with Miller being his greatest contributor.<sup>37</sup> The election clearly represented the political power of the growers, who had basically purchased a sheriff who would be more receptive to their side of the dispute.

Interestingly, the Harringtons suddenly decided to abandon *El Cuhamil* and relocate to another part of San Juan. Why they did this is unknown. Perhaps Chávez and the UFW leadership instructed them to do so in order to avoid negative press coverage. Although the Harringtons never technically represented the national UFW in the dispute over *El Cuhamil*, for the time being Orendain would not have to worry about opposition from the other union. Instead, the UFW simply ignored him, and as one observer pointed out they refused to publish any information on the dramatic situation developing in Texas.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, Chávez and the UFW were content to continue isolating the Texas farm workers by ignoring their struggle.

In late June 1976, Orendain met with the *Central Campesinos Independiente* in Río Bravo, Mexico, as a search for “greater unity” among workers from both sides of the border. He was still running his radio program, which was reduced to a weekly broadcast rather than six days per week, and claimed it was reaching many workers in Mexico who understood and supported the union. Since the alienation of the poor involved politics on both sides of the border, Orendain argued that Mexican and Texas farm workers had to

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<sup>37</sup> “Growers Pot New Sheriff,” *El Cuhamil*, 25 June 1976, 1, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>38</sup> “After the Calm;” “Letters,” both in *El Cuhamil*, 25 June 1976, 2, 5, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

join together. “Christ is not going to come and save us from this struggle,” he said, adding, “it is only when we treat each other as brothers that he will return.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite this statement of unity, it is difficult to measure the success of the TFW at this point. Although they successfully led large strikes and convinced workers to join them, working and living conditions had not noticeably improved in the Valley. It also did not appear that Orendain was any closer in effecting farm-worker legislation in the capital. To Orendain’s credit, the odds were indeed stacked against him – the growers, political structure, UFW, and AFL-CIO were all either unsympathetic or openly hostile to his efforts. Nevertheless, the TFW director moved forward.

On June 27 Orendain led the strike north, when about 50 strikers left the Valley for Río Grande City to lead strikes against local melon growers. Three days later a strike unfolded in Saragoza, without the TFW, where 300 workers walked out of the tomato fields. A large demonstration against melon growers in that area was being prepared, as workers waited for the arrival of the TFW as it moved north. Clearly, Orendain’s plan of encouraging workers to strike on their own was effective. The union leader also encouraged them to be persistent in their efforts. Telling the workers not to be discouraged that their demonstrations were so small in comparison to the UFW in California, Orendain said the union was using “all that is left of our strength and resources.”<sup>40</sup> “Despite a downturn in active public support, almost no funds and even less media coverage,” the TFW continued working hard. To support the current strike, the Austin Friends of the

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<sup>39</sup> “Meeting Means Unity...” *El Cuhamil*, 25 June 1976, 6, 5, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>40</sup> “TFW Strike Moves on to...Crystal City,” Orendain, “Our Struggle Must Move Forward,” both in *El Cuhamil*, 9 July 1976, 1, 2, 4, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

Farm Workers organized a statewide caravan to collect food and money. Groups from Houston, San Angelo, Eagle Pass, and El Paso contributed to the effort and met in San Juan on the weekend of July 16, 1976.<sup>41</sup> During this time, Orendain also began publicly pushing for farm worker legislation to be passed, and began planning a petition to collect signatures in support of such a bill. Though not scheduled to begin until late September, the petition would seek “signatures...calling for workers’ rights, collective bargaining, and fair procedures for establishing representation in a body authorized to guarantee agreements.” Many groups agreed to participate, surprisingly to Orendain, who in the union’s newspaper issued a public statement of gratitude and explanation of what the sought-after bill would accomplish.<sup>42</sup> Time would tell if this impassioned effort would prove successful.

The “migratory strike” continued and eventually ended with little fanfare. Meanwhile, Orendain held a meeting with State Representative Gonzalo Barrientos to discuss the proposed farm labor bill. Barrientos told Orendain he would introduce the bill during the upcoming legislative session in January 1977, although he doubted it would pass. To pass it, Barrientos said the bill needed widespread support, including that of César Chávez and his union, which was highly unlikely.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, with the petition and bill Orendain decided the TFW was “going to try its luck by means of the democratic” process,

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<sup>41</sup> Clipping, Maria Flores and Glenn Scott, “‘Friends’ Seek Aid,” 9 July 1976, *Daily Texan*, 5, Folder 17, MGFP-UT; Press Release, 15 July 1976, Folder 6, MGFP-UT.

<sup>42</sup> Gómez-Quiñónez, *Mexican-American Labor*, 256; “Open Letter From the Austin Friends of the Farm Workers to Support the TFW,” 7 July 1976, Folder 6, MGFP-UT; Orendain, “TFW Pushes For Labor Law,” *El Cuhamil*, 6 August 1976, 1-2, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>43</sup> “Interview With Gonzalo Barrientos,” *El Cuhamil*, 6 August 1976, 1, 3, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

and that an intense period of “lobbying” and politicking was facing them in the fall of 1976.<sup>44</sup> Thus a new phase in the struggle was about to begin.

As Orendain began publicizing his petition plan, a sixteen-year old farm worker and UFW member, Juan José Trinidad, was shot and killed in the small town of Donna, allegedly attempting to break into a growers’ home at 6:30 in the afternoon, August 6. According to the grower, he and his wife were watching television when they heard someone trying to force their way through a front window. As the boy fell through the window and continued to advance on the grower, he was shot six times with a small-caliber handgun and died on the scene.

The TFW immediately took issue with the suspicious story. “Why,” they posed, “would Trinidad attempt to burglarize a house in broad daylight, with the owners inside? Exactly why did the grower fire six shots at Trinidad without giving any warning? And was Trinidad actually inside the house or just looking in? Perhaps even knocking?” The union also wondered what became of the two friends he was allegedly with, as the sheriff’s department was unable to find them. Union officials also cited the C.L. Miller shooting in 1975, saying it set a precedent in the Valley, “which says that any farm worker on private property can be legally shot and even killed by a grower.” Trespassing was a more likely cause for the incident. Either way, the grower was never indicted.<sup>45</sup>

The next day, Orendain traveled to San Antonio and participated in a march of about 500 Chicanos who were protesting the murder of a young Mexican American by a

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<sup>44</sup> Orendain, “Attention! Attention! Attention!” *El Cuhamil*, 6 August 1976, 3, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>45</sup> “Farmworker Killed by Grower,” *El Cuhamil*, 6 August 1976, 1, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

police officer in 1975. Several different Chicano organizations participated, and Orendain used the event to publicize the farm workers' plight, saying, "we hope that our march and rally will make our complaints known to people beyond Dolph Briscoe." He continued, "a Chicano was killed...we have a purpose. We want justice to be done. If justice will not prevail then it will be more dangerous for us as Chicanos."<sup>46</sup> These were strong words from Orendain, who to this point had carefully kept his union separated from the Chicano movement. By publicly allying himself with Chicano activists, Orendain was clearly making a political move aimed at strengthening the upcoming petition for farm worker legislation.

Over the next month, violence against migrant farm workers escalated across the Southwest. Although probably not related to the activities of the TFW, the union did take advantage of each occurrence, protesting anti-farm worker sentiment to dramatize their efforts. In late August, three Mexican nationals looking for work were tortured in Arizona – stripped, stabbed, burned with hot pokers, dragged across the desert and finally shot; the three victims amazingly survived the ordeal. In their newspaper, *El Cuhamil*, the TFW condemned "these acts of torture and savagery against the farm workers from Mexico whose only crime was to come to this country to look for work to be able to feed their children." Union officials agreed with Mexican officials who said the three men were "victims of fascism."<sup>47</sup> In a separate incident in September, another farm worker was tortured – this time in the Río Grande Valley – and unfortunately died of his wounds. The union also raised alarm over this event, utilizing it to publicize the plight of the farm worker and the need for passage of the farm worker bill in the upcoming legislative

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<sup>46</sup> "March For Justice," *El Cuhamil*, 23 August 1976, 1, 3, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>47</sup> "Three Workers Tortured in U.S.," "TFW Takes Stand," "Mexico Protests 'U.S. Savagery,'" all in *El Cuhamil*, 3 September 1976, 1, 4, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

session.<sup>48</sup> Morose events like these would hopefully demonstrate the necessity of a farm worker bill and ease its passage.

Continuing his plan to ally with other Chicano groups, a delegation from the TFW led by Orendain publicly announced its statewide petition campaign for the upcoming labor bill on September 19 at the state *La Raza Unida* convention. José Ángel Gutiérrez of *La Raza Unida* pledged his party's support for the union and its petition, saying, "the party and the TFW will become the meat and bone of the farm worker movement." The delegation announced a 500,000-signature goal for the petition, as well as some details of the bill itself, which at the time was still being drafted by Barrientos. The bill would call for a Texas Agricultural Labor Relations board, which would "act very much as the National Labor Relations Board does." It would also "certify unions through secret ballot elections" and would "allow contracts only between certified unions and growers." Union organizers would also be sent to different areas of Texas, which was divided into four targeted zones, to collect signatures.<sup>49</sup>

The support of *La Raza Unida* was greatly appreciated but Orendain knew that without the backing of the UFW passage of the bill would be unlikely. Thus, the union continued to issue "calls for support," knowing they needed much assistance to overcome Texas's "right to work" laws. Citing the brutality of the Texas Rangers at the end of the Starr County strike and the C.L. Miller shooting, the union argued that they "and the farm workers who support [the bill] will not be able to carry out this struggle by themselves."

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<sup>48</sup> "Farm Worker Beaten to Death," *El Cuhamil*, 20 September 1976, 1, 3, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA; "Support the Farm Worker Law," *El Cuhamil*, 20 September 1976, 2, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>49</sup> "TFW Launches Legislation Campaign," *El Cuhamil*, 31 September 1976, 1, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

Orendain and the union targeted sympathetic individuals and organizations, such as labor locals and churches, in the call for support. They were needed because the TFW lacked the funds to lobby for the bill in the traditional manner. The support of either the UFW or the Texas AFL-CIO would certainly have been welcome, but both organizations remained silent on the issue. If the bill did not pass, Orendain “promised” that every union member, which at this point was about 3,000 workers, would walk off the job in protest.<sup>50</sup>

In late September 1976 Orendain visited Southern California to garner out-of-state support for the petition. Workers in San Jose who supported the UFW called for support of the TFW, and the Texas Farm Workers Support Committee was formed in San Diego, where Orendain’s wife Raquel had given a speech in July.<sup>51</sup> All efforts were being concentrated on the petition and no demonstrations were planned for the time being. On October 11, four TFW organizers – Jesus Luna, Douglas Kellar, Jorge Zaragoza, and Armando Acosta – left the Valley to organize the petition drive. Luna was sent to Houston, Kellar to Austin, Zaragoza to San Antonio, and Acosta to rural West Texas. It was not known how long each organizer would be gone, except that Kellar planned to remain in Austin for the legislative session in January.<sup>52</sup>

Orendain felt encouraged after returning from his California trip. To him, the state was presenting a “democratic maturity” as several farm worker bills were about to be voted

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<sup>50</sup> “TFW Calls For Support,” *El Cuhamil*, 31 September 1976, 1, 6, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA; clipping, Wanda Pryor, “Farm Unionists Plan Petition for Labor Bill,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 13 October 1976, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

<sup>51</sup> “Letters,” *El Cuhamil*, 31 September 1976, 8, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>52</sup> “TFW Organizers Leave On Petition Drive,” *El Cuhamil*, 22 October 1976, 1, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

on. He hoped to “follow in the footsteps they have made there,” and thought since many California workers migrated from Texas it would only be a matter of time before sympathetic Californians (namely, UFW members) turned their attention towards Texas.<sup>53</sup> Aside from the support he gained while in California, committees in Houston, Austin, El Paso, San Angelo, Crystal City, Dallas, Fort Worth, Lubbock, Muleshoe, and even Chicago, were hard at work gaining signatures and publicizing the legislation.<sup>54</sup> The petitions signed introduced the bill’s specific parts, citing a labor-relations law passed in California in 1975 as its predecessor. It also warned that the continued refusal of growers to recognize representation “appears to be leading us toward prolonged unrest,” indicating that if the bill failed to pass the union would increase demonstrations.<sup>55</sup>

The petition drive continued with strong support throughout the winter of 1976, and the union achieved its goal of 500,000 signatures.<sup>56</sup> The Legislature convened in January 1977, and by early February Barrientos completed the 35-page bill, with special emphasis being given to the proposed five-person Agricultural Labor Relations Board. The union hoped that the five people would be full-time workers and that at least three would be lawyers. Under the bill both the TFW and UFW would remain autonomous, but workers from both unions would pay dues directly to the board.<sup>57</sup> Chávez’s and the UFW’s continued silence on the issue can only be interpreted as continued opposition to Orendain’s breakaway efforts.

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<sup>53</sup> Orendain, “Proposition 14,” *El Cuhamil*, 22 October 1976, 2, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>54</sup> Orendain, “Support Committees,” *El Cuhamil*, 22 October 1976, 4, Oversize Box 8-2, MAFWM-UTA.

<sup>55</sup> “Petition by TFWU to Texas Legislature and Governors to be Signed by Texas Citizens, 1976,” Folder 3, TFWUP-UT.

<sup>56</sup> Gómez-Quiñónez, *Mexican-American Labor*, 256.

<sup>57</sup> Clipping, “Farmworker Aid Bill Drafted,” *Daily Texan*, 7 February 1977, 2, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.



The bill was introduced into the Texas House in late February, with similar legislation introduced in the Senate. At this point, Orendain enjoyed the support of the Catholic Church, American GI Forum, Texas Council of Churches, and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Still, the most important missing piece – the UFW – refused to acknowledge his union. Orendain knew that for the bill to have a chance he had to dramatize his efforts. Thus, he decided to lead a march from San Juan to Austin – 440 miles – to publicize and gain support for the bill. Orendain also contacted Governor Briscoe, who to his amazement agreed to meet with him and a small delegation from the union once they reached Austin.

Thus the march began with hope, and on February 26 the marchers left Our Lady of San Juan Shrine for Austin. From the moment they left, insults and obscenities were constantly hurled at them from passers-by, and one observer noted that police protection of the group was “spotty” at best. Orendain led the group but to interested reporters disclaimed being the march’s leader, saying instead “the people lead me.” Despite the typical difficulties involved in the march, one onlooker noted the people were “giving absolutely 100 percent for a progressive cause,” and a general spirit of optimism permeated their ranks.<sup>58</sup>

After a trying journey of a month and a half, the group arrived in Austin. Orendain met and shook hands with Briscoe at the Governor’s Mansion in front of a crowd of reporters, and was subsequently invited inside with a small delegation for a private meeting. Briscoe was presented with the union’s petition and in a 30-minute meeting outlined “his

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<sup>58</sup> Clipping, Juan Maldonado, “Farmworkers Wage Symbolic Battle,” *Daily Texan*, 1 April 1977, 1, 8, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

thoughts on what the state has already done for poor workers.” After the meeting ended, both sides characterized it as positive and friendly, but Orendain and the marchers – demonstrating their political naiveté – were noticeably disappointed. “I am certainly not supporting that [the bill] today,” the Governor told reporters after the meeting. Orendain was upset but remained determined to continue the struggle. “I am not going to give up,” he told the reporters, “I didn’t give up in 1966 and that was 11 years ago. What’s another 11 years?” One observer noticed that, although the governor treated the marchers cordially, he “wasn’t smiling much.”<sup>59</sup>

Later that day, a special Senate subcommittee heard testimony from the union on the legislation, but its passage remained unlikely. Orendain spoke to the committee and urged passage of the bill, saying we “have come to Austin seeking the best solution to our problems, in a nonviolent manner, seeking a way by which we can take part in our free enterprise system.” After hearing several hours of testimony the situation remained unchanged. Carlos Truan, who had sponsored the bill in the Senate, remained doubtful of its chances, saying, “There will be no push to pass this legislation. I am hopeful we can establish an interim study commission that will come forth with solutions to these problems.”<sup>60</sup> Thus the day ended on a sour note for Orendain and the marchers.

Unable to pass the farm worker bill and with no strikes planned for the near future, things remained quiet through April and May 1977. In early June, Orendain got an idea: the governor of Texas and lawmakers had killed the farm worker bill, but what if he brought

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<sup>59</sup> Clipping, James Trotter, “Farmworkers Meet With Briscoe,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 5 April 1977, 1, 9, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

the struggle to the national level? Of course farm worker issues already occupied the national spotlight under Chávez and the UFW, but the TFW was fighting a different battle with different issues. Would President Jimmy Carter and the lawmakers in Washington scorn their efforts? Orendain did not think so, especially if the union took drastic measures. Thus, Orendain got the idea for a 1,600-mile march from Austin to Washington. The government of Texas could ignore the farm workers' problems, but certainly the government of the United States would not.

The march to Washington was scheduled to leave Austin on June 18 at 7:30 a.m. The primary purpose was to gain “a dialogue with the President to acquaint him with the plight of the Farmworker [sic]. Perhaps in this manner proposals made by the Farmworkers [sic] will receive favorable consideration.” The union sought endorsements and financial support, as Orendain estimated that \$15,000 was needed to begin the march. They also needed medical supplies, food, doctors and lawyers who were willing to donate their time.<sup>61</sup>

The expensive and highly publicized march began in earnest on June 18 with about 45 participants, and for the first month the strikers traveled unabated across southern Texas and Louisiana – waving their *huelga* flags and successfully garnering support along the way. TFW rallies were held in Lake Charles, Lafayette, New Orleans, and several other small towns along the route. On July 18 when they reached Poplarville, Mississippi, union members had their first and only “run-in” with law enforcement during the march. At noon local sheriff's deputies stopped the marchers about 8 miles southwest of town. Not

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<sup>61</sup> News Release, Folder 12, MGFP-UT; “Urgent Appeal,” *International Peoples Appeal Newsletter*, June-July 1977, 1, 3, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

knowing that Orendain and the marchers were traveling through the county, the officers thought that the group had assembled simply to obstruct traffic on the highway, thus Orendain and 35 others were arrested and taken to prison in Jackson. Sheriff Lawrence Holliday, who knew the marchers were simply “traveling through,” cleared up the misunderstanding, freeing Orendain and the others. “Everybody left friendly and no charges were filed,” Holliday later said.

The marchers arrived in Hattiesburg, Mississippi about two days later, where another rally was held in their honor. Various human rights groups attended in support of the effort. Keeping a planned 20-mile per day schedule which would put them in Washington on September 5, the union next stopped in the small town of Laurel.<sup>62</sup> From Laurel the marchers continued east through Mississippi and Alabama, largely without incident, until they reached Atlanta on August 6. In Atlanta a high-profile rally was held, with Martin Luther King’s widow Coretta Scott King in attendance. The rally was highly publicized in the media, and more extensive coverage was being given to the march.<sup>63</sup>

The marchers arrived in Greenville, South Carolina on August 11, and held a rally at a local Catholic Church. Upon arrival Orendain and the marchers were in good spirits. Orendain issued a statement on the purpose of the march, saying he hoped to meet with President Carter and other legislators after arriving in Washington on Labor Day. Instead of getting the collective bargaining agreement for farm workers in just Texas, Orendain said he would argue for extending the law in California across the entire nation. He also

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<sup>62</sup> Clipping, Karl Hill, “Texas Farm Workers in State on Walk to Nation’s Capitol,” *Greenville News*, 11 August 1977, Folder 17, MGFP-UT; Press Release, 21 July 1977, Folder 6, MGFP-UT; clipping, “35 Farm Workers Arrested, Freed,” *Austin American-Statesman*; clipping, “Texas Farm Workers are Back on Road,” *Hattiesburg American*, 19 July 1977, 2, last two in Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

<sup>63</sup> Press Release, 3 August 1977; Press Release, 6 August 1977, both in Folder 6, MGFP-UT.

said that the marchers had experienced few problems so far on the trip, “other than blistered feet and a couple of drenchings on rainy days,” and the arrest in Mississippi, “so far the response has been good.” The union had made “more friends and [gotten] more names for our petitions along the way.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, public reaction so far was encouraging.

Next the marchers shifted north, and during their mid-August sojourn through North Carolina received the aid of various Catholic groups of that state.<sup>65</sup> By August 16 the group reached Charlotte, and chants of “*viva la marcha*” and “*viva Antonio Orendain*” could be heard as they marched up Interstate 85. Orendain remained pragmatic, and by this point doubted whether a “federal remedy” to their issues would be found once they reached Washington. In Charlotte Orendain also called on all union supporters to write President Carter urging him to receive the marchers and talk.<sup>66</sup>

After Charlotte the marchers traveled north through Virginia without incident. As the group neared Washington, word reached Orendain that Carter would not be able to meet with them once they arrived. Reports as to why conflicted. Some said the President did not want to involve himself in the dispute while others claimed the President was simply too busy to meet with them.<sup>67</sup> The news came as a shock to Orendain – Briscoe, despite being a grower himself, had at least given them an audience in Austin. Why, after a

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<sup>64</sup> Clipping, Karl Hill, “Texas Farm Workers in State on Walk to Nation’s Capitol,” *Greenville News*, 11 August 1977, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

<sup>65</sup> Clipping, “North Carolina Catholics to Aid Texas Farm Workers Along March Route,” 14 August 1977, 1, 11, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

<sup>66</sup> Clipping, Mary Bishop, “Texas Farm Workers Bring Protest March to Charlotte,” *Charlotte Observer*, 16 August 1977, 1B, Folder 17, MGFP-UT; Press Release, 16 August 1977, Folder 6, MGFP-UT.

<sup>67</sup> Clipping, “Farm Workers Seek Carter,” *San Antonio Express-News*, 3 September 1977, 5, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

1,600-mile journey would Carter deny them? The answer was not immediately apparent to Orendain, but with time he would learn why.

On September 6, 1977 the marchers reached Washington, and the following day Orendain held a meeting with Labor Secretary Ray Marshall, afterwards pronouncing their discussions as “productive.” Orendain was still requesting a meeting with Carter “for just five minutes” which would only be “largely symbolic,” and prospects seemed to be brightening. The White House first offered a meeting with one of Carter’s assistants, which the union initially rejected but then accepted on the condition the meeting would not preclude another meeting with the President. Orendain dryly remarked, “we keep hoping to see President Carter, any time of the day, any day of this week, in the same way that he has been available to these dictators,” referring to the Latin American leaders who were in Washington to sign the Panama Canal Treaty. This confrontational rhetoric would certainly not endear Orendain to the President, but the union leader promised the marchers would stay in Washington until Carter agreed to meet.<sup>68</sup>

As the next week passed the meeting with Carter appeared unlikely. In response, Orendain and 11 of the marchers agreed to go on a water-only fast for the next 15-30 days until Carter agreed to meet with them. They also started a 24-hour-a-day vigil outside of the White House on September 12, hoping it would also affect a meeting with the President. Only 12 would participate because many of the marchers, mostly women and children, returned to Texas.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Clipping, “Farmworkers Tell Woes to Marshall;” clipping, “Y’all Come Over,” both in *Austin American-Statesman*, 8 September 1977, 2B, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

<sup>69</sup> Clipping, “Marchers Fast; Wait for Carter,” *Dallas Times-Herald*, 13 September 1977, 15, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

Unfortunately, it appeared they were wasting their time. Orendain was granted a meeting with Midge Costanza, one of Carter's assistants, but was unable to procure a meeting with Carter. The marchers later received word that no matter how long they stayed, Carter did not have time for them. "He's too busy entertaining dictators," Orendain angrily reiterated. As the reality of the situation began to set in, Orendain realized there was nothing more he could do. When a reporter asked him why he thought Carter refused to meet the marchers, Orendain replied, "because we are too small."<sup>70</sup> Had the TFW enjoyed the backing of either the UFW or the AFL-CIO, the meeting would likely have happened. Acting alone and without the support Orendain had sought since the TFW's inception, he simply had little power.

Orendain was given an unexpected meeting with Vice President Walter Mondale on September 16. The two had met before in 1966, and part of the meeting was spent reminiscing on the early days of the movement in Texas. Mondale, who had long been popular with the Mexican-American community, pledged his support for the union's efforts to get Texas's right-to-work laws repealed, although a meeting with Carter was still not produced. However, the meeting did end amicably, with Orendain saying, "the only thing I say is I feel sorry Mondale is not our President." Afterwards he returned to the marchers and called off the hunger strike because "the group was physically unable to continue, not because of the meeting with Mondale." However dejected he felt at not gaining an audience with Carter, Orendain claimed the march was "a great success" because it "raised the awareness of the public."

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<sup>70</sup> Clipping, "Farmworkers on Hunger Strike Press for Carter Talk," *Austin American-Statesman*, 14 September 1977, 1B, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

As the 12 marchers began preparing to leave Washington the next day and travel back to the Valley by bus, rumors began circulating that the President had refused Orendain an audience “because the Texas Farm Workers are not endorsed by the leadership of the AFL-CIO, which supports the California-based United Farm Workers.”<sup>71</sup> It soon came out that Chávez contacted Carter and told him that Orendain and the TFW “were not proper representatives of the Texas farm workers.” Orendain did not learn this until sometime after he had left Washington, but the news infuriated him. In his mind, all of his union’s arduous efforts “were sabotaged by Chavez.”<sup>72</sup> If he had previously hoped for a future reunion with Chávez and that the UFW would get involved in Texas, he now understood that this would never happen. The march to Washington had been his grandest effort, and if it could be “sabotaged” by Chávez, there clearly was little room for Orendain’s small union within the farm workers’ movement.

Establishing why Chávez did this is easy but it seems uncharacteristic of him. His antagonism toward Orendain had continued unabated for 2 years. Why not just let Orendain do what he could for the Texas farm workers while the UFW was embroiled in actions elsewhere? Were the supposed “differences in tactics” so unpalatable that he felt the need to thwart Orendain’s largest efforts? Again, it must be reiterated that Orendain had never condoned violence and was still advocating non-violence. In fact, one could argue that violence was more common on UFW picket lines. Whether the violence was coming from members of either union was never easy to establish, but violent occurrences

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<sup>71</sup> Clipping, John Geddie, “Texas Farm Workers End 4-Day Hunger Strike,” *Dallas Morning News*, 17 September 1977, 9A, Folder 17, MGFP-UT.

<sup>72</sup> Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005; Nina Melanie Orendain interview by the author, 18 January 2005; Joe Holley, “The Texas Farmworkers’ Split,” *Texas Observer*, 17 April 1981, 5.



seemed more common in California. Thus, Chávez could not criticize Orendain for failing to protect his picketers from violence. Yes, the two men had different styles – Orendain, although soft-spoken, was much more confrontational and argumentative than Chávez, who tended to be quieter and less confrontational.<sup>73</sup> But this makes Chávez's move to block Orendain from meeting with Carter seem very out of character. Nevertheless, the man who claimed to be their true leader stymied a move by Orendain that could have contributed to the improvement of working and living conditions for Texas farm workers. An internal dispute that Chávez could not let go of was clouding his judgment.

Because of the publicity surrounding the movement, some working conditions in Texas had nominally improved,<sup>74</sup> although in general they remained poor. By early 1978, seventy percent of Texas farm workers were still earning wages under the poverty level. A staggering eighty-six percent of farm worker children did not finish high school, while seventy percent of adults had less than four years of schooling. Conditions also remained poor in the *colonias*, thirty-three percent of which had no water at all, forcing the residents to either collect it from irrigation ditches or golf course sprinklers.<sup>75</sup>

The hostilities of Chávez coupled with the ever-oppressive conditions of the farm workers made Orendain realize that the TFW would probably never achieve its objectives.<sup>76</sup> However, to Orendain's credit, he was not yet ready to give up. There were no significant strikes or demonstrations in 1978, but Orendain continued to lobby the Texas Legislature in hopes of getting a new farm worker bill passed. In October Orendain

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<sup>73</sup> Nina Melanie Orendain interview by the author, 18 January 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> "Facts About Texas Farm Workers," Folder 13, Box 1, MFWC-UTA.

<sup>76</sup> Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005.

petitioned the legislators, asking each individual lawmaker to inform the TFW as to whether they would support a new farm worker bill, since the old ones were tied up in committees in both the House and the Senate. He also said that in the coming session the union was prepared to have many more people on the steps of the capitol than they had the year before, to “communicate our desires to obtain collective bargaining rights for the worker.” He claimed they would stay on those steps as long as necessary to secure those rights.<sup>77</sup>

For the duration of 1978 things remained quiet for the TFW, aside from a hunger strike led by Orendain on the steps of the capitol during a special legislative session. In February of 1979 House Bill 227, the new farm worker bill, was introduced. Initially, the bill appeared to have more support than its predecessor, and Orendain – who relocated his mobile home and personal base of operations from San Juan to Pharr – worked hard at garnering support for the bill throughout the Valley. He also led a group of union members on a little-publicized march from Muleshoe to Austin to publicize the bill.<sup>78</sup> Orendain considered the bill as “the only non-violent, secure way to accomplish justice. By the same token, if we have to find another way to reach the same goal, we will.”<sup>79</sup>

Orendain’s remarks clearly betray his frustration, likely at Chávez and the UFW for their open hostility and lack of support. Lobbying for a farm worker bill was his last option – if Chávez would oppose his actions on a national scale and refuse to support his activities in Texas, what else could he do? Predictably, the new bill met the same fate as its

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<sup>77</sup> Orendain to Texas Legislators, 2 October 1978, Folder 1, TFWUP-UT.

<sup>78</sup> De León, *Mexican Americans in Texas*, 147; Bob Fatheree, “Hard Road to Travel,” *Texas Observer*, 2 February 1979, 18.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

predecessor, requiring that Orendain and the TFW think of a new strategy. Thus they returned to strikes, although activities were small in scale and somewhat sporadic. In 1980, Orendain assigned Jesus Moya, a TFW organizer, to the Hereford area, where he led workers at onion packing sheds in a strike for better wages and toilets. The strike was broken, but Moya successfully encouraged workers to continue organizing on their own, and they did so into the mid-1980s after the TFW's demise.<sup>80</sup>

Two events occurred in 1980 that did little to advance the cause of the workers but were remarkable for Orendain. As a part of a goodwill tour to express solidarity among indigenous, working-class peoples, Orendain gained an audience with Yasser Arafat in Lebanon, where he delivered a warmly received speech to the Palestinian leader and his entourage. He next flew to Iran, and in a move that drew criticism expressed support for a group of reform-minded Iranian students holding some American hostages. This and other events brought charges that Orendain was a communist, which the union leader laughingly rebuked: "What is communism? I don't even understand it." Despite this, Orendain said he would work with anyone willing to help him, "communist, socialist, Republican," even "the devil himself, as long as my hands don't get burned."<sup>81</sup> This kind of rhetoric would not re-entendear him to his ever-cautious, former mentor.

In the spring of 1981, Chávez visited San Juan and spoke at a UFW convention, sounding much more practical than the Chávez of old. During his speech, Chávez said,

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<sup>80</sup> Yolanda Romero, "Trini Gomez, the Texas Farm Workers, and Mexican-American Community Empowerment: Trial and Trouble on the Texas South Plains," in *Mexican Americans in Texas History*, editors Emilio Zamora, Cynthia Orozco, and Rudolfo Rocha (Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 2000), 143-155.

<sup>81</sup> Joe Holley, "The Texas Farmworkers' Split," *Texas Observer*, 17 April 1981, 8; Nina Melanie Orendain, email correspondence with the author, 24-25 January 2005.

“we talk about justice and dignity and all of those phrases that are beautiful and reach the heart of all of us. But on this day we want more pragmatic changes –”<sup>82</sup> an allusion to his opinion that the union was still not prepared to lead a large-scale movement in Texas. Nevertheless, after the incident Orendain “spoke regretfully of his break with Chavez, suggesting his old friend had lost touch with the people.” Orendain argued, “if Chavez really believed in Texas, he could help us get a [collective bargaining] law. It would automatically put us [the TFW] out of business, but that’s fine because we don’t have the money from the AFL-CIO like he does.” He further stated “I don’t see nothing [sic] wrong with me preparing the land and he coming in behind to reap the harvest.”

Amazingly, sometime that spring Chávez did offer Orendain an olive branch, although the terms were unacceptable. Chávez said “[Orendain] could return to the UFW fold under one condition: he would have to put in a year’s work in the fields – as a farm worker, not an organizer – apparently as a kind of penance.” Orendain refused, realizing that even if he did rejoin the UFW Chávez would still not organize in Texas. Also during the spring Rebecca Harrington began slandering the TFW again, saying it “is not a union” and that they “have no people, they don’t know how to organize, [and] they make promises the just can’t keep.”<sup>83</sup> Like the TFW, the “Harrington faction” was pushing for legislation to be passed, but only workers’ compensation and unemployment benefits, instead of collective bargaining. The TFW introduced another bill for collective bargaining, but Harrington opposed it, saying the timing was not right and the UFW needed contracts before they would support such a bill. Harrington argued that the bill, if it passed, would be

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 6.

so “gutted by amendments” that it would not accomplish anything for the workers.

Orendain remained unconvinced:

So what? [Orendain] responds. Right now, even in Arizona, farmworkers [sic] are under contract, even with 100 percent illegal workers. Those people are able to organize. Here in Texas we have no law, bad or good, and we can’t organize. The law is only a tool to make a union. It doesn’t guarantee anything.<sup>84</sup>

This was the TFW’s main problem with Harrington, as both Orendain and later Moya publicly stated, that the workers primarily wanted the ability to organize before their other issues, such as workers’ compensation and unemployment benefits, were addressed. “This woman is betraying the farm workers,” Moya declared, “She’s going against their demands. The workers *want* to be organized.”<sup>85</sup> These tactical differences would never be bridged.

By 1981, TFW activities were limited as Orendain realized the Chávez-led opposition was simply too much for his small union.<sup>86</sup> The previous year, the TFW led a small-scale strike in the onion fields of Deaf Smith County, and Moya returned to Hereford trying to revitalize the onion strike of the previous year, but to no avail.<sup>87</sup> Orendain’s activities throughout the rest of 1981 were also limited. Some small-scale demonstrations took place, but nothing of consequence happened for the union.

Press coverage of both the TFW and Orendain also began to wane. In May of 1982, Orendain spoke out on several issues. He talked about the poor conditions in the Valley’s *colonias*, and how despite them the workers spoke proudly of their homes because they owned them, “even if it was only a pile of boards:”

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<sup>84</sup> Joe Holley, “The Texas Farmworkers’ Split,” *Texas Observer*, 17 April 1981, 7.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>86</sup> Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005.

<sup>87</sup> Joe Holley, “The Texas Farmworkers’ Split,” *Texas Observer*, 17 April 1981, 5; Ruperto García, “Conditions in the Onion Fields,” *Texas Observer*, 24 July 1981, 10-12.

What do you expect, with an annual salary of only \$2,000 or \$3,000? Why do they live that way? Because they, too, are proud and want to be able to partake of the American way of life, to have a nice house and well, this is all they can afford.<sup>88</sup>

He also publicly refuted allegations that the TFW paid people to participate in its demonstrations – a ridiculous charge against an impoverished union that did not even charge membership fees. Also that spring, Orendain went on fund raising trips to Chicago and later to Austin, to speak with a legislator who was considering “sponsoring” the union. When he returned to the Valley, the union led about 32 strikes during the onion harvest in May and Orendain was arrested on one occasion for trespassing. Union representatives were also still making daily trips to the international bridge at Hidalgo to divert green-carders from entering Texas.<sup>89</sup>

After the onion strikes of 1982, Orendain realized that the TFW simply could not continue. His efforts at “paving the way” for Chávez were failing because the UFW leader not only opposed Orendain’s actions, but also because Chávez had no plans to organize in Texas in the foreseeable future. Thus, with no support and the continued opposition of Chávez, Orendain resigned as TFW director in 1982 and the union quickly fell apart. Had Chávez and the UFW not interfered in TFW activities, or had they or the AFL-CIO provided financial backing, Orendain and the TFW undoubtedly could have persisted. However, intra-union politics, jealousies, and back stabbing from the “mother union” had

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<sup>88</sup> Clipping, Evelyn Hernández, “The Tired and Poor Huddle in the Colonias of the Valley,” and, “Migrants Toil in Fertile Valley,” both in *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, 16 May 1982, 1, 8, 13, Folder 13, Box 1, MFWC-UTA.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.; Clipping, Evelyn Hernández, “Farm Labor Unions Hoeing a Tough Row in the Valley,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, 17 May 1982, 1-2, Folder 13, Box 1, MFWC-UTA.

successfully driven Orendain and the TFW out of business.<sup>90</sup> The alienation of Orendain and the Río Grande Valley farm workers, a process over 10 years in the making, was finally complete.

The UFW retained its presence in the Valley, as it had during the lifespan of the TFW. From 1978 to 1981 the “Harrington faction” and other UFW representatives lobbied the Texas Legislature, eventually getting a bill passed in May of 1981 outlawing the use the short handled hoe, which caused severe back and neck injuries for the workers. Also in 1981, Chávez led a march from Brownsville to San Juan, which was largely symbolic in nature. This was his last major appearance in the area. By 1982, the union had forced the Health Department to require toilets in the fields. However, after 1982 the UFW’s push for farm workers in the Valley remained minimal at best.

Today the union maintains a presence in the Valley, but under an organization it created entitled *La Union del Pueblo Entero* (LUPE). LUPE is a “non-profit organization that focuses on community-based organizing, self-development, and civic engagement of members.” The union also maintains the National Farm Workers Service Center in San Juan, which focuses on building low-income housing.<sup>91</sup> There are no plans currently to organize the Valley’s farm workers.

Unfortunately, Orendain’s wife Raquel passed away not long after he left the TFW. For many years afterwards Orendain continued his radio show, *La Voz del Campesino*, where he continued to talk about farm worker problems and conditions in the *colonias*. He

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<sup>90</sup> Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005.

<sup>91</sup> “The United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO, in Texas,” Folder 13, Box 1, MFWC-UTA; James C. Harrington, “From La Casita to LUPE,” Texas Observer, 3 December 2004, [www.texasobserver.org](http://www.texasobserver.org), accessed 11 January 2005; Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005.

worked diligently in community activism, and also did volunteer work with local children. When his health began declining he became somewhat less active in the community, although he continued to be a regional celebrity with the Hispanic population of South Texas and northern Mexico. Orendain currently resides in Pharr, Texas.<sup>92</sup>

Reflecting on his career as a farm labor organizer in the Río Grande Valley, Orendain had much to be proud of but also reason to be embittered. During his early years in California with CSO, Orendain became committed to helping his fellow farm workers, and during the formative years of the NFWA became a committed *huelgista*. During the Starr County strike, Orendain became the “César Chávez of Texas,” demonstrating his commitment not only to the UFW and its leader but also to the impoverished workers of the Río Grande Valley. After a brief sojourn in California, Orendain returned to the Valley in 1969 and waited six frustrating years for Chávez to bring his labor movement to Texas. When he understood Chávez had no designs on Texas, Orendain stepped out on his own and in 1975 formed the TFW, with various UFW factions and finally Chávez himself opposing his efforts. Upon disbanding the TFW in 1982, Orendain must have realized that the struggle on behalf of the Valley’s farm workers was still far from being won.

Studying Orendain’s career is important for several reasons. First of all, it reveals that despite Chávez’s and the UFW’s effort at displaying a unified front, the farm workers’ movement was by no means a cohesive effort, as different ideas and goals were conspicuous after Orendain left the UFW in 1975. It also shows that Chávez, an extremely well respected man in the Mexican-American community, was not perfect and showed

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<sup>92</sup> Orendain interview by the author, 11 January 2005; Nina Melanie Orendain interview by the author, 18 January 2005.



several clear lapses in judgment when dealing with the wayward Orendain. The sabotaging of Orendain's efforts by the "mother union" contradicts Chávez's passive philosophy. Finally, Orendain's career was in and of itself important because of his steadfast dedication to and hard work on behalf of the workers in the Río Grande Valley. For those not familiar with the TFW, it would be easy to assume that farm labor organizing in Texas ended when the Starr County strike was defeated in 1967. But against all odds Orendain struggled until 1982 and because of his hard work and many sacrifices, his story deserves to be told.

In an article in *El Malcriado* on May 24, 1986, the UFW celebrated the 20-year anniversary of its presence in Texas. The author recounted the history of the union in the state from the beginning of the Starr County strike, citing Chávez, Nelson, Huerta, and Chandler as the major players in union activity. Orendain is left out and given no credit for having led substantial union activities in the Valley. Likewise, the TFW was completely ignored.<sup>93</sup> The "great union," as Orendain often called it, was trying to blot him and his contributions from the historical record. Orendain clearly made invaluable contributions as a leader in the farm workers' movement in Texas, however, which in the end, cannot be denied.

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<sup>93</sup> "La Union Celebra 20 Años de Lucha en Texas," *El Malcriado*, 24 Mayo 1986, 26-27.

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