

# Growing Pains of a 20-Year-Old Union

*As Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers Union prepares to mark an important anniversary, the early fire of its cause has been banked by the day-to-day needs of running the union and fighting off its enemies.*

**By Dick Meister**

It's Sept. 30, 1962. Cesar Chavez, a stocky, disarmingly soft-spoken man, stands at the podium on a small stage in Fresno, Calif., presiding over the founding convention of his tiny, unknown organization. Suddenly, Chavez pudgy young cousin, Manuel, rips off a huge piece of wrapping paper that covers the wall behind the podium, unveiling a blazing red banner with a stylized black Aztec eagle emblazoned boldly in the center. "When that damn eagle flies," roars Manuel Chavez, "the problems of the farm workers will be solved!"

We've seen the red banner many times since that day — the now world-famous symbol of the United Farm Workers Union, waving high above demonstrators in virtually every state. We've heard their chants of "boycott!" in front of supermarkets, their cries of "Strike!" on the edges of vineyards and lettuce fields. We've heard Cesar Chavez' pleas for *La Causa* — the quest of farm workers for the basic right of unionization, granted most nonagricultural workers in the United States more than four decades ago.

But the banners are rarely seen now by most people, the urgent voices rarely heard. The surface drama of the farm labor movement that excited millions during the '60s and '70s is gone, and with its disappearance has come word that the UFW is in deep trouble, nearly 20 years after its banner was unveiled.

Troubled the UFW is, but not nearly as troubled as imagined by the media's messengers of gloom, who too often equate the lack of highly visible, dramatic and easily reported activity with failure.

The UFW, quite simply, no longer has the legal right



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— or, theoretically, the need — to wage strikes and boycotts to seek unionization in its home base of California. Those activities were aimed primarily at winning a law that would grant the right to unionize, and that law was won seven years ago. Workers on California farms, now need only vote to be represented by a union and their

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grower employers are legally obligated to bargain with them collectively on pay and working conditions.

Pressing for effective operation of California's farm labor law thus has had to become the union's preoccupation, one requiring relatively undramatic political and legal action. It requires, too, that the UFW put together a bureaucracy able to administer an established union and to stress quiet bargaining for current members over the exciting public activity of organizing new members. If the union is to remain true to its original goals, it must do this while making certain the UFW is run by and for farm workers.

The new task has plunged the UFW into a struggle against unrelenting grower attempts to cripple the farm labor law, and into internal turmoil over its own tactics. Three times the UFW has been forced to persuade Gov. Jerry Brown to veto weakening amendments passed by the legislature, and it is fighting constantly against cuts in the budget of the board that enforces the law.

The board's staff already has been trimmed from 120 to 80, even though it must now handle more than twice as much business as in its initial years.

Some growers have refused to bargain or reach contract agreements with the UFW for as long as two years after union election victories. Others have helped form unions to oppose the UFW, have fired UFW sympathizers, have denied organizers access to their workers and have hired masses of illegal aliens from Mexico, who are in no position to demand union representation or any other legal rights.

More than 1,000 such union charges are pending before the overwhelmed farm labor board and, although it generally upholds the UFW, it has been taking as long as 30 months to rule on charges and 18 months just to certify some elections. Growers sometimes have delayed resolution even longer by appealing board rulings in court and, though the growers usually lose, these appeals further drain the limited resources of the board and the union.

Hence workers and UFW supporters complain that joining the union accomplishes little except force members to contribute time and money to frustrating legal action and to political activities on behalf of Brown and others not beloved by all.

Not surprisingly, the union, has scarcely grown in recent years. Only about one-fifth of California's farm workers are under UFW contracts, and there are few signs of effective organizing in other states. So what to do?

Abandon legal action and adopt a revolutionary posture, argue the non-Chicano "Anglo" activists who once labored for the UFW as part of a broader cause, that once radically transforming all of society. They are unhappy that the UFW has become part of the labor establishment.

No, argue orthodox unionists: Do what many unions do.

Hire well-paid professionals. Replace the inexperienced Chicano farm workers who get the same subsistence wages as the UFW's elected officers for helping run the union. The arguments have led to the firing — some call it "putting" — of lower level Anglo staff members whose idealistic fervor was essential in the union's formative stage, and of a dozen local UFW representatives. It also has caused the resignation of several top staffers and officers, Anglo and Chicano, who sought "professionalization" of the union staff.

Those fired were charged with trying to "impose their own agendas" on the UFW and with not sufficiently involving members in decisions. They were attacked at the union's convention last fall as "traitors and conspirators," along with about 50 delegates who put forward a slate of officers to challenge Chavez's slate. Dissenters charged that Chavez has become a dictator who demands unquestioning adherence to his views.

The charges on both sides were greatly exaggerated. But it is clear that Chavez and his supporters are demanding adherence to their vision of a large, effective union run solely by deeply committed members with the active participation of all members. They insist this can be realized through continued membership training and education and a reorganization now under way.

That might seem highly unlikely, especially considering the attitude of many farm workers. Like other workers today, they tend to regard unions merely as organizations that should provide services in exchange for dues and not require anything else of them except occasional votes of confidence in the officers and the contracts they negotiate.

Yet it also once seemed highly unlikely that the UFW would do any of what it already has done. The average pay of California farm workers — well below \$1.50 an hour when the union began organizing — has more than tripled. Thousands of farm workers now have the legal right to medical care, protection against health and safety hazards, pensions, paid vacations and holidays; they have the right to be fired only for just cause, to act against employers who treat them unfairly, to be allocated work by seniority rather than employer whim, to honor the picket lines of others, and other rights that were only a dream less than a decade ago. This includes, above all, the right to unionize, the right that made all the other rights possible.

That the United Farm Workers Union has come so very far is compelling argument that it can travel the rest of the way, whatever the odds. The black eagle may yet soar.

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