

# Cesar Chavez

Autobiography of *La Causa*.

By Jacques E. Levy.

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By **WINTHROP GRIFFITH**

The zealot must make many personal sacrifices in his absolute commitment to a cause. One of the continuing prices Cesar Chavez must pay for his commitment to the cause of the American farm worker is the public perversion of his character and leadership. To his enemies—led by corporate growers in California—he is a rabble-rousing devil. To his followers—and there are tens of thousands of them throughout the nation—he is a gentle saint, a purifying leader in the often brutal realm of the farm labor movement.

In reality, Chavez is an extraordinarily talented labor organizer, with his feet on the ground, his personality charismatic and his mind a fertile ground absorbing the lessons of life, power, politics and public relations.

Chavez's life and the story of "La Causa" are inseparable. Jacques Levy spent five years researching both in the difficult dual roles of reporter and participant. He is clearly a fan of Chavez, but he exercises impressive restraint in avoiding any overt hero-worship in this book.

The inseparability of Chavez and the farm worker cause—and the precarious balance of the author's two roles—result in some confusion in the opening pages. Mr. Levy has trouble deciding whether his book is a biography, an autobiography, a personal journal or tape-recorded history.

But it quickly becomes a successful blending of all four literary formats. The narrative flows smoothly with brilliantly edited transcripts of Levy's interviews with Chavez and other key figures in the movement for a farm workers' union. The accounts by Chavez and others, of his early life and the first, groping efforts to organize farm workers in the Southwest are particularly interesting.

It is a story of poverty and hardship, told without self-pity or complaint. "I had more happy moments as a child than unhappy moments," Chavez re-

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members. The reader sees, usually vividly, Chavez as a boy who didn't like to wear shoes or attend school, who worked with his father in the fields of Arizona and California, who listened attentively to the "dicos" (wise proverbs) of his mother. We see Chavez's early confrontations with Anglo bigotry, the failure of his father's small grocery store and modest ranch in rural Arizona, the hopeful departure in 1939 for California in an overloaded car with only \$40 to sustain the whole family as it joined the hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Depression and dust bowl states.

Author Levy and subject Chavez neither glorify nor disparage the early efforts to establish a union of farm workers. Some of the best chapters reveal both the naiveté and tenacity of Chavez as he began driving the lonely, flat roads of California's valleys to rally the farm workers. Often his friends—even his brother and his wife—told him he was crazy to try, but he kept at it, scrounging a gallon of gas in one town, an infrequent meal in another town, simply talking—endlessly talking—with any worker who would pause to listen to him.

The passages from Levy's "notebook" and from interviews with dozens of participants in "La Causa" are interesting and occasionally eloquent. But they are mere supplements to the real power and strength: the words of Chavez, which add up to more than half the book.

Chavez emerges as neither devil nor saint. The style of his language, discussing both necessity and philosophy as in this early passage, is often beautiful:

"... So I resigned my job and set out to found a union. At first I was frightened, very frightened. But by the time I had missed the fourth paycheck and found things were still going, that the moon was still there and the sky and the flowers, I began to laugh. I really began to feel free. . . ."

"After all, if you're outraged at conditions, then you can't possibly be free or happy until you devote all your time to changing them and do nothing but that. The affluence in this country is our biggest trap, because we can't change anything if we want to hold on to a good job, a good way of life, and avoid sacrifice. . . ." Chavez reveals that he never had any precise master plan, long-range agenda or formula of techniques to establish a farm workers' union: "When you pick grapes,

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you pick a bunch at a time. Eventually you pick the whole vineyard. Organizing is no different. You get in trouble when you begin to get away from the fundamental, when you begin to corrupt organizing by trying to apply all kinds of theories and methods. . . ."

Chavez speaks persuasively to Levy and the reader about his philosophy of non-violence, but he and his lieutenants are not at all saintly as they describe their instincts to exploit the violence which erupted in the fields when Chavez's union suffered setbacks after its 1970 victories.

Aware of the presence of television cameras and the value of public sympathy, Chavez prayed with Dorothy Day—a wrinkled lady of 76—that she would be jailed during one battle in Fresno County, Calif., in the summer of 1973. In another troubled moment for "La Causa," the chief attorney for Chavez's union, Jerry Cohen, was assaulted by goons in a field near Salinas. As he is pummeled to the ground, he shouts out to author Levy, "Hey, Jacques, take a picture of this!"

Levy's book takes the reader into the near present, the spring of 1975. The Chavez fan and the reader of this book, hoping for resolution of the battles and perhaps victory for Chavez, must be disappointed. The final chapters convey fragments of images, pieces of scene and disjointed narratives. Except for some factual errors (the name of New York's senior Senator is spelled Javitz), author Levy cannot be faulted for the confusion in the final pages. In reality, both Chavez's struggle and the battle of "La Causa" remain unresolved. California's new farm labor law, adopted after the book was finished, has not guaranteed "peace in the fields." The secret ballot elections under that law, in which workers could vote for Chavez, the Teamsters or no union at all, so far have resulted in a near tie for Chavez's United Farm Workers Union and the Teamsters Union, and the ballots in many of the farm elections are presently being challenged.

The definitive book on Chavez and the farm labor movement will have to be written some time in the future, perhaps several decades from now when the jurisdictional disputes and the full effect of the mechanization of farm work is evident. For the present, Levy's careful and sentimentally-restrained book is the most powerful account available of the mood and spirit of Chavez the man and "La Causa" as a movement. ■

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