

A CONVERSATION WITH CESAR CHAVEZ

ROBERTO A. BUSTOS / STRIKER 1965-1973

CESAR CHAVEZ TO ME WILL ALWAYS BE MY LEADER, MY MENTOR, MY FRIEND. I CONSIDER HIM AS ONE OF MY BIG BROTHERS!

CESAR, ORGANIZED ME. HE SHOWED ME ALL THE SUFFERINGS NOT ONLY OF FARMWORKERS BUT ALL HUMAN BEINGS. HE OPENED MY EYES TO ALL THE INJUSTICES OF FARMWORKERS! HE TAUGHT ME HOW TO ORGANIZE WORKERS, HOW TO FIGHT FOR THEM, HOW TO BE A BETTER MAN, A JUST MAN.

I REMEMBER WHEN I FIRST MET CESAR! WE WERE LIVING IN EARLIMART. MY BROTHER TOLD ME LET'S GO TO A MEETING TONIGHT AT SOME HOUSE THERE IN EARLIMART THAT THE MAN OF THE STRIKE WILL BE THERE TO TALK ABOUT IT! I THINK IT WAS ABOUT 3 DAYS AFTER THE STRIKE STARTED THAT WE HEARD ABOUT THE MEETING. SO ME AND MY BROTHER WENT OVER. THERE WERE ABOUT 30 TO 40 PEOPLE THERE AND THIS MAN STARTED TALKING ABOUT THE UNION AND WHY WE NEED THE UNION AND THE PROTECTION. EVERY WORD HE WAS SAYING HE WAS TALKING ABOUT MY FATHER AND MY BROTHERS. THEY ALSO WORKED IN THE FIELDS ALL THEIR LIVES. MY FATHER SLAVED ALL DAY WORKING UNDER THE LABOR CONTRACTORS. WE ALL KNEW THAT AT THE END THERE WERE NO BENEFITS AND NO MONEY WAS REPORTED TO THE GOVERNMENT FOR OUR OLD AGE ASSISTANCE.

AFTER THE MEETING, I WANTED TO GET CLOSER AND GREET HIM BUT THERE WERE TOO MANY PEOPLE SURROUNDING HIM I COULDN'T GET CLOSE. SO MY BROTHER SAID YOU WANT TO GO TOMORROW AND SEE HIM AND JOIN UP? I SAID YES! SO THAT NIGHT WE TOLD OUR FOREMAN THAT WE WERE JOINING THE STRIKE! HE TOLD US WE WERE CRAZY AND STUPID!

SO THE NEXT DAY WE WENT TO DELANO TO THE OFFICE THEY HAD ON ALBANY STREET AND WALKED IN AND SAW CESAR CHAVEZ THERE TALKING WITH OTHER PEOPLE AND HE CAME OVER AND SHOOK OUR HANDS AND SAID WELCOME BROTHERS! AND THEN HE GOT ALL THE INFO HE NEEDED ABOUT US, I.E., WHERE WE WORK, NAME OF COMPANY, AND HOW MANY WORKERS ARE THERE AND IF THEY TOO ARE WILLING TO STRIKE!

HE TOLD US TO COME BACK TOMORROW AT 6AM SO THAT WE CAN MEET OTHER STRIKERS AND TO BE ASSIGNED TO A CREW THAT WE WILL BE PART OF!

AND THAT IS HOW WE STARTED THE UNION IN SEPTEMBER OF 1965!

AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER I WILL NEVER FORGET A TALK CESAR TOLD US STRIKERS JUST BEFORE WE WENT OUT TO THE FARMS TO PICKET THE RANCHES AND TALK TO THE WORKERS ABOUT UNIONIZING AND JOINING THE STRIKE.

HE SAID GUYS GET READY FOR A FIGHT! AND BOY WAS IT A FIGHT! I DID NOT KNOW WE TOOK ON THE MOST POWERFUL, RICHEST INDUSTRY IN THE NATION!

THEY WERE THE DELANO GRAPE GROWERS OF AMERICA! THEY HAD THE MONEY, THE POWER, THE POLITICIANS, THE POLICE ON THEIR SIDE. ALL WE HAD WAS OUR FAITH, OUR DETERMINATION AND OUR PICKET SIGNS!

IT WAS A LONG HARD AND SUFFERING BATTLE, THERE WERE TIMES WHEN THINGS WERE GETTING DESPERATE AND BLEAK! AT TIMES, WITH ALL THE HARRASSMENT, INTIMIDATION, BEATINGS, AND THROWN IN JAIL EVERY DAY, WE THOUGHT THIS TIME AROUND IT WOULD BE OVER FOR US!

BUT THEN SUPPORT STARTED COMING IN DONATIONS, FOOD, CLOTHES, OTHER UNIONS PLEDGING THEIR SUPPORT AND PEOPLE IN GENERAL SUPPORTING US AND ENCOURAGING US TO GIVE THEM HELL! WE BOUNCED BACK AND SAID: "BRING IT ON" WE ARE NOT ALONE ANY MORE.

IT TOOK US 5 YEARS TO WIN THE STRIKE IN DELANO, BUT WE MADE HISTORY! FIRST TIME IN HISTORY THAT FARMWORKERS TOOK ON THEIR EMPLOYERS AND WON WITH THE HELP OF ONE MAN WHO SAID "ENOUGH IS ENOUGH".

VIVA CESAR CHAVEZ!

I FOUND OUT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (CONGRESS) BACK IN 1935 PASSED A LAW THAT GAVE MILLIONS OF WORKERS THE RIGHT TO ORGANIZE, BARGAIN COLLECTIVELY FOR HIGHER WAGES, WORKING CONDITIONS, AND OTHER HEALTH BENEFITS AND THE RIGHT TO BELONG TO A UNION OF THEIR CHOICE THROUGH SECRET BALLOT ELECTIONS! BUT WAY AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BILL, IT SAID EXCEPT FARMWORKERS CANNOT! I SAID "WHAT?"

THAT SAME QUESTION I ASKED CESAR DURING ONE OF OUR PICKET LINES, I ASKED WHY WERE FARMWORKERS LEFT OUT OF THE LAW? HE SAID ROBERTO, FARMWORKERS DON'T HAVE ANY FRIENDS IN CONGRESS (WASHINGTON) FARMWORKERS DON'T HAVE ANYONE TO FIGHT FOR THEM. THAT'S WHY WE ARE HERE. THAT'S WHAT WE ARE DOING! THEN HE SAID WHO DO YOU THINK MAKES THOSE LAWS? THEIR SONS AND DAUGHTERS WHO GO TO COLLEGE AND STUDY AND THEY COME BACK AS LAWYERS, SENATORS, CONGRESSMEN, PRESIDENTS! AND THEY MAKE THOSE LAWS THAT PROTECT THEIR PARENTS FARMS FROM UNIONS.

AND HE WENT ON TO SAY BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR KIDS? DO THEY GO TO COLLEGE? DO THEY FINISH SCHOOL? NO! SOMETIMES THEY HAVE TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL AT AN EARLY AGE TO START WORKING TO HELP THEIR PARENTS MAKE ENDS MEET. HOW SAD, HE SAID.

AND YOU KNOW HE'S RIGHT! WE SEE THAT A LOT!