

David Averbuck 1968–1970

The Virgin and the Esquiroles

Less than a year out of law school at Berkeley and full of the dreams of the free speech movement, anything seemed possible to my wife, Patti, and me when we came to Delano. It was the 1960s, and despite the recent assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, we arrived with all the romanticism, brash self-assurance, and optimism that had permeated most of the decade. Cesar Chavez and Jerry Cohen had invited me to join them as the second lawyer for the young, struggling, and dynamic United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. Patti soon began working for Cesar and Jim Drake, helping coordinate the national table grape boycott.

On my second day of working for the union, Cesar came down the hall to the law office located in the converted kitchen of the Pink House and asked me to accompany him to the picket line. I was delighted at the chance to be on the line and flattered that Cesar had picked me to accompany him. Our destination was a vineyard where the grower had used particularly ruthless tactics to break our strike. Early that morning 60 farmworkers had been brought in from the Mexican border and our organizers were trying to get them to walk out of the fields and join our strike.

Cesar and I arrived to a scene filled with shouts, blazing sunlight, and vibrant colors everywhere. He brought me to the top of an earthen embankment where roughly 50 huelgistas (strikers) were shouting and waving bright red-and-white union flags and picket signs emblazoned with the famous black eagle of the union. Other than me, the only non-striker was the union's youthful Catholic priest, Father Mark Day, clad in his ebony shirt and pure white priest's collar.

In his right hand, he balanced a dark wooden pole from the top of which hung a massive rectangular ivory banner bearing the majestic image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. From the high ground where Cesar and I and the huelgistas stood, the rich green vineyards filled with ripe yellow grapes spread out in every direction. Each group of players in the drama seemed physically confined to their own spaces filled with intense activity. Below us, in the neat rows of grapevines, were the bedraggled strikebreakers whose bewildered faces and dark eyes were filled with fear. Under the sun's glare and the shouts of our people that filled this little corner of the San Joaquin Valley, the grape pickers tried to hide within the lush emerald vines as they worked. When they boarded the labor contractor's buses the day before in Calexico, these poor laborers had not been told that they would be used to break our strike or that they would face the taunts of our aggressive picketers. Arriving in darkness and anxious to earn some desperately needed dollars, they quietly started to harvest the grapes—unaware that the morning silence would abruptly end once our strikers arrived in their dilapidated vehicles. Now, above them, the huelgistas yelled "*Viva la huelga!*" and "*Viva la union!*" A few teenage strikers vehemently screamed "*Esquiroles!*" at

them. The word “*esquirol*” is the Spanish equivalent of a loathsome “scab”—a selfish strikebreaker.

When Cesar arrived, he turned to those *huelgistas* yelling “*esquiroles*” and, with a slight wagging of his index finger, conveyed his disappointment in them. They stopped yelling the insult and joined the others calling for the workers to come out of the field.

Behind us, down on the asphalt two-lane country road, six Kern County sheriff’s deputies in starched khaki uniforms stood in cold dead silence beside their patrol cars watching Cesar. He did not seem to notice, or perhaps he chose to ignore them. Several feet away, wearing bleached white shirts, the labor contractors gathered around the grower and his supervisors. Two were toting rifles, the grower had a handgun at his side in a small black leather holster, and shotguns hung on racks in their three company pickup trucks. When they spotted Cesar, one hollered an obscene word as the rest hooted derisively, too loudly, so that they could be heard momentarily over the cries of our picketers.

Cesar paid them no attention. His focus was on the workers below us. I watched, yelled an occasional “*Viva la huelga*,” and wondered what would happen next. After a few minutes, Cesar asked an organizer to loan him a bullhorn and he handed it to me.

“Talk to them, David. See what you can do to get them to come out and join us.” I turned to Cesar, surprised at his request, and shook my head explaining that my Spanish was mostly slang from my youth growing up in East Los Angeles. He smiled and gently pushed the bullhorn at me: I could not refuse. I asked him, “What should I say?” He replied, “It’s up to you.”

Cesar then turned to our strikers and asked for their silence “because the new lawyer is going to speak.” I decided to play it safe, carefully picking my words in Spanish. “Listen, *compadres*,” my voice blared through the bullhorn, “Come join the strike! You’ll get better wages! Better hours! Better working conditions!”

The response was not what I had expected. Most of our older *huelgistas* smiled, a few looked away, and the strikebreakers turned away and went on working. Cesar gently took the bullhorn out of my hands, locked his dark brown eyes on mine, and softly chastised me, “You don’t understand these workers.” I asked what he meant.

Cesar Chavez, the teacher, began giving his naïve and optimistic young lawyer a profound lesson. “David, these strikebreakers are the poorest of the poor. They are migrants and most of the time they are at the mercy of the growers and the labor contractors. They do not see the world the same way you do. For them time is very short.” Cesar paused and could sense my continued ignorance. “Look, David, if you ask them where they will be working next week, they might be able to tell you. If you ask them where they’ll be in two weeks, they probably would have to guess. Three months? Don’t ask them. It would be an insult because they could not give you an answer. No, David, ‘time’ for them is short. They

think about the next paycheck, the next job they get, maybe even just the next meal. They are used to thinking in days, at best maybe weeks. Now the growers, they think in years. They love time. They plant vines knowing how many years it will take until they turn a profit. They buy a tractor and amortize it over 10 years. They buy land and pay off the mortgage over 30 years. Time is their friend.

“When you asked the workers to come out for better wages, hours, and working conditions, you made time our enemy.” “How did I do that, Cesar?” “David, suppose they join us today on strike because of what you promised them. What if they come to you in a week and say, ‘Where are the better wages, hours, and working conditions?’ Can you keep your promise to them in a week?” No, I admitted, we would not win in a week. “They know that, David. How about two weeks?” I shook my head, “No.” “How about a month, three months?” “No, Cesar.” “That’s right. We have been striking for years and it will take many more years to get the growers to sit down and negotiate with us. David, if you cannot give them what you promise, they will go back to work and become real *esquirolas*. Then they will always cross our picket lines.” “Then what should I have said to them, Cesar?” “First, you have to learn to negate time.” “How do I do that?” I asked.

This was the moment Cesar had been waiting for. It was the reason he had brought me out to the picket line so soon after my arrival in Delano. In almost a whisper he said the one thing that he wanted me to understand most clearly about working for the union: “You have to know your constituency.”

He saw that I was totally at a loss, so he asked if I had ever been to the Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe near Mexico City. I had not. “If you ever go there, you will see that it is almost 100 yards from the road to the church where they keep the Virgin. You will see many pilgrims crawling on their knees over the cobblestones from the bus stop to the shrine. It is a sign of their love and devotion to the Virgin. Some have crawled for miles, for days, for weeks, from their villages as penance for something they’ve done or gratitude for something the Virgin has done for them. David, there is something in the Mexican mystique that is almost sadomasochistic, which flourishes from suffering. When those people crawl and bleed, they get more out of the pain of crawling than actually getting to the shrine of the Virgin. Time becomes meaningless and, in fact, the longer the pain, the more miraculous and magnificent their lives become.” Then after a pause and with the utmost certainty, Cesar added, “You have to know that and use it.”

Cesar was a profoundly devout Catholic and spiritual man. I was stunned not only to hear his complex analysis of the Mexican psyche, but also his agile pragmatism, nay, his willingness to exploit the workers’ religious faith for the benefit of *La Causa*.

To drive his lesson home, he slowly walked next to Father Day and the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and then turned toward the workers in the field. Raising the bullhorn, he began: “Don’t listen to the lawyer,” he said, with a sardonic smile, in Spanish, “he knows nothing about you.” The strikebreakers laughed and, recognizing Cesar, most

stopped working to listen. “The *abogado* has promised you better wages, hours, and working conditions. I don’t know if we will ever be able to win these things. This has been a long and hard strike. We have suffered and will continue to suffer. Some of us will be hurt. Some may even die fighting the growers. To join us means that you must be able to endure more hardships without any promise of victory. We may never win.”

Everyone stood motionless. The strikebreakers stared at Cesar and appreciated not only his honesty and his sincerity, but also the respect he was paying to the workers as he spoke the truth. Then, without raising his voice, Cesar became passionate. “No, I do not want you to come out on strike to get things! Not even for things you deserve! I want you to come out on strike for your children. I want you to come out on strike so your children can look you in the face and be proud that you are their father or their mother, and not an *esquirol*. I want you to come out on strike so that you can look your fellow workers in the face, your brothers and sisters here who are also on strike, so that you can look at yourself every morning in the mirror and be proud of who you are, not a scab but a human being. I want you to come out on strike so you can keep your soul, your integrity, your self-respect.”

Everyone, everyone was suddenly silent. “Brothers and sisters! Do not walk out of the field asking for anything. I cannot promise you anything but a long struggle and hardship. But, when you come out of the field to join us, I want you to come out with pride, with dignity. And when you join us, we ask you to get down on your knees and pray—pray to our Virgin of Guadalupe!”

First one, then a group of three, then more left the field. The labor contractors ran toward them and began shouting in Spanish for them to return to work. The pickers ignored them. As each worker left the field, the huelgistas roared their support, fists raised to the sun in defiance and strength, while the grower and his men fell into silence, looking on helplessly in frustration and hatred.

Cesar calmly shook hands with each of the new huelgistas as they climbed the embankment to be embraced by our picketers. In a few minutes just a handful of strikebreakers remained among the grapes. Father Day began singing “*De Colores*,” a beautiful Mexican song about springtime and rebirth. He soon was joined by the huelgistas—the new and the old ones together. Then slowly they followed Cesar, one by one, each kneeling before the Virgin.

A dust devil filled with San Joaquin Valley dust and hot wind suddenly picked up behind me. I looked back in its direction and could barely discern those who chose not to leave the field. They stood alone, watching from below, in their bitter pain, silently accepting their decision.

They had become *esquiroles*.

