

Elizabeth (Liz) Farnsworth 1969–1970

I wrote the following memo just after the events it describes—an encounter with Cesar Chavez on January 27, 1970. I had come to Delano with my husband, attorney Chuck Farnsworth, about six months earlier and was working part-time at *El Malcriado*. I carelessly (and with scant knowledge of the facts) voiced some criticisms of Cesar that I had picked up from others about the high profile of Anglos in the union. The remarks were passed on to Cesar.

I was learning to use the rationalizing typewriter at *El Malcriado*. Cesar came in with Richard and Manuel (Chavez). Cesar looked upset—lips quivering, eyes red. He told editor Doug Adair to send Rudy Reyes over to speak to him as soon as he showed up to work. Rudy had blown up at a meeting the preceding day and broken some car windows. I thought Cesar was mad because of that. Then he looked at me and asked me to come and talk to him privately in the car. He seemed angry, and I thought he would probably ask why I was working at *El Malcriado* without speaking to him about it. We got into the car. Jenny (Chuck's and my daughter, then age 15 months) had a cookie to munch on to keep her quiet.

“Liz, I'm going to be quite frank with you,” Cesar began. “I've decided whenever I hear things people have said about me behind my back that I should confront them with it. I just wish anyone with complaints would come to me first. I heard that you made these complaints: that you thought Larry (Itliong) should go to India for a conference we're invited to instead of Jim (Drake) and that you thought I discouraged challenges to my leadership by sending potential rivals off on the boycott. Your examples of potential rivals were Manuel Vasquez and Marcos Muñoz. Now, I'm going to tell you the truth about these matters. Larry has been away often in the past few years. He spent a few months in Brazil and in the Philippines. We need him here now. Furthermore, there is a religious spirit about this conference that demands a strongly religious man like Jim. And finally, neither Marcos nor Manuel is a leader. They've been in the movement two or three years. Dolores, Gil, and I have been in it 20 years. They wanted to go out on the boycott; none of the top leadership did.”

I stood up for myself in some feeble way, saying I hadn't been strongly criticizing but had simply been asking a friend if she knew why Jim was going. I felt incapable of getting across to Cesar the innocent nature of my concerns. I also recognized the honor Cesar was paying me in speaking to me in this way. I was a nobody in the union, but he was acting as if what I thought mattered.

Cesar said he didn't “give a shit” what color a man's skin is as long as he works hard and is honorable. He said he has three criteria for workers: (1) no drugs; (2) no infidelity; (3) no laziness. He wants with him people who work very hard and who work very well. That's why Jim, LeRoy, and Jerry are so close to him. “Furthermore,” he said, “race shouldn't matter.” He considers this union a movement of all races, and he would not let racists

come in and break that up. “It will fail if we can’t keep racial arguments out. I don’t even think about color when dealing with people. I’ll give up my life to this movement but not my principles.”

He said he remembered how horrible it was to be a Mexican here years ago—how degrading. But still he won’t hire Mexicans just to have them here instead of Anglos. “You know why we don’t have a Mexican attorney? Because all the ones we’ve looked at were racists or were hung up.”

He said the union was being torn apart by people’s complaints, especially Anglos. He said he didn’t want praise. “All the praise shortens my life by a day because it brings the assassin’s bullet closer and closer. I’m just an ordinary man, but I want people to confront me with their complaints, not talk behind my back.”

He explained that talk like mine angered Mexicans in the movement who then wanted to “get the Anglo” who criticized Cesar. “I spend my time having to help the races get along. Do you know that?” His daughter got angry when she heard of my complaints, and now he’d have to go quiet her down. He warned me that everyone in the union hears about everything that goes on, that even our meeting in the car would be discussed soon.

I assured him I understood and that I agreed that no movement should be racially based. I said I did not join in the griping about him and that I would never have taken this complaint to him because I’d been afraid of him. I said that if I’d been Cesar, I would have said, “It’s none of your business. Now get out of here.”

He said that, on the contrary, we’re all important in this movement.

I suggested for his sanity he must get used to criticism and said it is usually as much about the person doing the criticism as about him. He assured me he wasn’t angry at me but insisted that people should not talk behind other’s backs but rather confront each other and have it out.

I thanked him for talking so honestly with me, said good-bye, got out of the car, walked into *El Macriado* to get my things, and then drove home. I cried all the way.