

APPENDIX D

Al Krebs was the first journalist to write about Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement for the Catholic Press and the Religious News Service. His articles about the refusal of the Christian Brothers Winery to recognize the NFWA in early 1967, caused much turmoil – and embarrassment - within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Christian Brothers used their advertising leverage - with some success - to censor Al's articles submitted to the Catholic Press.

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COMMENTARY: HONORING CESAR CHAVEZ

By Al Krebs

An early morning tule fog was beginning to break up, signaling another soon to be hot day in California's San Joaquin Valley, as my plane's wheels touched the ground at the Bakersfield Airport. As the plane taxied to the gate I reflected on what had brought me here this day in early October 1965.

My odyssey began just a few days earlier when I had received a phone call from my friend LeRoy Chatfield, a member of the Roman Catholic Christian Brothers' order. The previous summer he had been teaching summer school in the Bakersfield area and several of his students were the children of the area's farmworkers. In the process he had gotten interested in a fledgling organization known as the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

In the previous two weeks prior to Chatfield's call the NFWA had joined with another union in striking the table grape growers in Delano, California, a town some 30 miles north of Bakersfield and he knowing of my interest and articles relating to the plight of the state's farmworkers thought this strike might make for a good story.

Reluctantly I agreed to make the trip, mainly owing to the fact that strikes like these were somewhat of a common occurrence throughout the valley and since they usually centered around wages a compromise would soon be reached and the workers would be back in the fields in a few days.

Alighting from the plane and making my way across the tarmac toward the airport's iron

gate entrance it suddenly occurred to me I had no idea of how I was going to make my way from the airport north to Delano. As I moved closer I spied a somewhat small in physical stature Chicano moving toward the same gate awaiting my arrival.

As I stepped through the gate he approached me with a smile on his face and inquired "Mr. Krebs" and as I nodded in the affirmative he said simply "I'm Cesar Chavez."

Since I had not yet had any breakfast we went into the airport coffee shop and while Chavez sipped tea and patiently laid out for me not only the events that had taken place in the past few weeks but the issues that were involved I ate my breakfast. Soon we were on Highway 101 to Delano where we continued our conversation.

Reflecting on that day now 38 years later I can say it was not only the longest period of time I ever had the opportunity to spend in private conversation with Chavez, but more importantly it was probably the most significant day of my career as a journalist, a career that has brought me today to this place and this time.

It was also a day that saw the forging of an invaluable friendship with a man who I came to revere and saw as a teacher and leader in the struggle for economic and social justice and an apostle of non-violence. It is that teacher, leader, apostle --- and friend that we who were fortunate enough to know the man mourn today ten years after his untimely death.

In a growing secular world Cesar Chavez was also a deeply religious man. As Archbishop Giovanni Benelli, speaking for the Vatican, observed: "We are indeed, grateful to Mr. Chavez for the lesson which he brings to our attention. It is a very important lesson: To know how to be conscious of the terrible responsibility that is incumbent on us who bear the name 'Christian.' His entire life is an illustration of this principle."

While much of what I learned from Chavez would be forthcoming in the months and years ahead two things that he said that first day we met have stuck with me through the years when it comes to the dynamics of modern day agriculture.

IF only family farmers would realize that they have more in common with farmworkers than they do with the large growers, who are largely creatures of the banks, and agribusiness, together we could form the most powerful agricultural bargaining agent in the history of this nation which would mean fairer prices for what the farmer produces and fair and living wages for the men and women who harvest the crops of their farms, Chavez argued.

He also decried the farm labor contracting system, employed by so many of the growers. "I would rather that there be no union at all than to recognize the rotten contractor system," he angrily declared.

It was in the mid-1960's when it became apparent that the days of the bracero program'

were numbered, there was new hope within California's farmworker community that at last the conditions might be right for the building of a union that could not only withstand the power of the state's growers, but could become an effective force for social and economic change within their own communities.

It was Chavez, having already gained valuable experience in the methods of community organizing, who at this time took the first tentative steps toward forming what would soon become the NFWA and later evolve into the United Farm Workers.

As the Mexican-American leader and a small group of long-time Chicano/a activists began to recruit new members into their fledgling organization, they would receive the dedicated assistance of Fred Ross, a long-time and tireless community organizer from the Saul Alinsky-founded Industrial Area Foundation, who Chavez had first met in San Jose in 1952 and would be subsequently be recruited into becoming a statewide organizer for the state-wide Community Service Organization (CSO).

Help would also come from a remarkable group of Roman Catholic clergy who, in spite of being in disfavor and repeatedly undermined by their own hierarchy, organized a Spanish "mission band" and worked with Chavez and the NFWA. It was a member of the "mission band," Father Tom McCullough who first introduced Ross in 1958 to a young woman and member of his Stockton, California parish by the name of Dolores Huerta. Huerta would later become one of the co-founders of the NFWA and is today first vice president-emeritus of the UFW.

Also standing with unswerving loyalty beside the NFWA\UFW were a dedicated group of mostly young Protestant ministers from the California Migrant Ministry, led by Rev. Wayne C.. "Chris" Hartmire, who provided not only material, spiritual and philosophical strength to the new association, but would remain faithfully at their side in the turbulent months and years of struggle ahead.

As one CMM commentator, Pat Hoffman, would later remark, "a tiny little finger of the church's life was drawn into a washing machine wringer in Delano and the whole body shook with anguish and pain, and God's justice was served."

The history of how these forces came together and helped forge a viable and legitimate grass-roots union movement in the fields of California has already been told vividly and authoritatively by Joan London and Henry Anderson in their book *So Shall Ye Reap: The Story of Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers' Movement* (Thomas Y. Crowell, New York: 1970).

Likewise, no journalist in recent times has better captured the ensuing interplay of labor, corporate agribusiness and government power and how it related to the beginnings of this the most significant farm labor movement of the 20th century than the former Los Angeles Times' reporter Ron Taylor in his book *Chavez and The Farmworkers: A Study in the*

Acquisition & Use of Power (Beacon Press, Boston: 1975).

Taylor aptly described Chavez as, "A teacher, a visionary who is at his best in the give-and-take of a meeting with farmworkers. He is gentle, frequently humorous, always persistent, sometimes ruthlessly sharp, seemingly arbitrary. There is never any doubt that he is the leader; yet the people in the meeting somehow convey the sense that they granted him the position, they project an air of expectation, and they impose upon him because he is their leader.

"Chavez is a listener; he hears the farmworkers not only in group meetings, but afterward, if any of them wish to speak to him privately, he is available; and it is from these contacts that the structures of the union have come. While Chavez learned the lessons of farm labor and migrancy as a child of migrants, he has tested his own feelings against the will of the farmworkers in countless meetings in every farming area of California.

"Out of all this he distilled his concept of a union. The hiring hall is the tool by which the [union] tends to wrest the power away from the growers. And from the very beginning Chavez has openly declared that this shift of power, if it is to be successful, must eliminate the labor contracting system that has been used to dominate and exploit farm wage earners since the growers first imported Chinese coolie labor in the 1870's."

Reflecting on his own life Chavez observes: "All my life, I have been driven by one dream, one goal, one vision: To overthrow a farm labor system in this nation that treats farmworkers as if they were not important human beings. Farmworkers are not agricultural implements --- they are not beasts of burden --- to be used and discarded. That dream was born in my youth. It was nurtured in my early days of organizing. It has flourished."

For a moving portrait of an extraordinary leader and organizer of farmworkers see Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa by Jacques Levy (W.W. Norton & Co.: New York: 1975).

By 1965 the NFWA was becoming more widely known throughout California's farmworker community, but it would be the actions of the now Filipino-dominated Agricultural Workers' Organizing Committee (AWOC) which would quickly thrust Chavez and his new union into the national spotlight.

The bracero program had been officially terminated by Congress as of January 1, 1964 and domestic farmworkers were already beginning to agitate for higher wages. One such action, initiated by AWOC, took place in the grape vineyards of California's Coachella Valley in the early summer of that year.

Because the wages Filipino field workers were receiving at this time were below that of wages that Mexican nationals had received under government supervised bracero program, the Filipino workers struck the vineyards and were successful in getting a wage boost from

\$1.25 an hour to \$1.40.

Later, these same pickers moved on to Delano, California, a community of 14,000 in the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, where their request for similar hourly wages were immediately rejected by the local growers.

They quickly requested the help of the local AWOC organizer Larry Itliong and on September 8, 1965 the Filipino workers struck by refusing to leave their camps for the vineyards. As the growers sought to recruit other outside workers Itliong went to Chavez and the NFWA and asked for their assistance in supporting their strike and on September 16 a somewhat reluctant, but determined NFWA voted to join the strike.

Although the two unions would later merge in August of 1966 to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (AFL-CIO), George Meany, the AFL-CIO president was initially unhappy over Itliong's soliciting Chavez's help, primarily due to the fact that the NFWA had support from a number of major civil rights and church activists, which the more traditional union leader considered an unsound trade union practice.

AWOC and the NFWA, however, would stand together on the picket lines in the months ahead, sharing their meals in Delano's Filipino Hall, and going on to develop a substantially unified labor front.

As a journalist covering those early years of the Delano grape strike, it was apparent to me that Cesar Chavez and the UFW were arrayed toe-to-toe against not only the enormous economic and political power that corporate agribusiness in California had wielded for so long and so effectively, but that the concepts of non-violence, the right to control their own lives, and the democratic principles of self-determination which lay at the heart of their movement were going to be difficult ones for many of their enemies and even some of their supporters to fully accept.

In the years which followed 1965, the union would be subjected to numerous acts of intimidation and violence by their employers or grower-hired thugs, in addition to the lawlessness of many of those very same state and local officials and government agencies entrusted to preserve "law and order" in their own communities.

Roving bands of strikers shouting "huelga! huelga! viva la huelga!" (strike!, strike! long live the strike!) not only began luring workers out of the Delano fields in 1965 and 1966, thus strengthening the union, but also angered and provoked local law officials into taking the type of retaliatory actions that would soon arouse national outrage.

In those early days of the Delano strike direct and substantial support from the leadership of national unions was sparing, with the notable exceptions of Paul Schrade, western regional director of the United Auto Workers (UAW), the UAW's Walter Reuther, and the AFL-CIO's William Kircher.

Yet, through the relentless picketing of strike-bound fields, growing national material and political support for their efforts by churches, civil rights groups and local labor unions, such as the dock workers of the International Longshoreman and Warehouse Union, the often grower-rigged and sometimes invalid union representation elections, successful consumer boycotts of table grapes and other products produced by the Delano growers, the assassination of their close friend and political supporter Robert F. Kennedy, threats on Chavez life, high-priced anti-union campaigns by California corporate agribusiness and always Chavez's relentless adherence and insistence on the principles of non-violence, the union managed in large part to prevail.

While it successfully managed to win a handful of recognition elections during this period it was not until July 29, 1970 that 26 of Delano's grape growers, feeling an increasing pressure from UFWOC's nationwide boycott campaign, signed a contract with the union. Those contracts would cover 50% of the table grape harvest in the state and subsequent contracts in Arvin and the Coachella Valley would add another 35% of the harvest.

When the strike started five years beforehand field workers were asking for \$1.40 an hour and 25 cents a field-packed box. The new contract, however, called for \$1.80 an hour, with 20 cents for a field-packed box.

In addition, the growers were to also pay ten cents an hour into the newly-formed Robert Kennedy Health and Welfare Fund, two cents an hour into a social service fund for each of their workers, agree to an arrangement whereby workers would be dispatched from the Union's Delano hiring hall, and protect their workers from chemical poisons.

All these newly established farmworker services along with a retirement community for the large number of aging single Filipino men were to be headquartered at the Union's 40 acres of land, west of Delano and which ironically sat literally in the shadows of several giant radio towers that 24 hours day beamed the Voice of America to the rest of the world. Later, the union would move its headquarters and training center south to La Paz, in the foothills of the Tehachapi mountains near Keene.

Throughout all the years which he headed the union Cesar Chavez remained dedicated to the virtues of non-violence and organizing and because of his steadfastness he helped build the UFW into not only this nation's most powerful farmworker union, but built a union that would take its place as one of the most honorable chapters in U.S. labor history. Truly, as his friend and admirer Robert F. Kennedy said, Chavez was "one of the heroic figures of our time."

Today the U.S. Postal Service unveils a Cesar Chavez first stamp class stamp (available nationally next Monday) honoring the labor leader. On it we see a smiling portrait of Chavez super imposed on a lush green worker-less field, with neatly manicured produce looking like a chemical poison ad fresh out of the Farm Journal.

That may be the Postal Service's take on the union leader. But for this writer a far more fitting portrait would have been one so many of us saw so frequently --- Chavez leading a group of striking farmworkers along a forlorn San Joaquin Valley road with a banner honoring Our Lady of Guadeloupe and dozens of striking red and black Aztec eagle flags flapping in the breeze.

And not far behind Chavez would have been his perfect epithet, a large hand-lettered white and black sign (usually carried in those early days of the Delano strike by the same LeRoy Chatfield who first introduced me to the NFWA and Chavez) which read simply:

"Don't Mourn Organize!!!"