

**CESAR CHAVEZ:  
IS ANYONE FOLLOWING THE LEADER?**

By John Hubner

**THE GOD OF  
THE MOVEMENT**

THE BOYS ARE DRESSED IN THEIR SUNDAY best, crisp white and tan shirts worn outside new slacks; the little girls are miniature ladies in summer dresses with frilly straps. Eyes wide, they take a few steps toward the speakers' table, hesitate, then take a couple more. They are in such awe of the man behind the podium, you can almost hear the echo of their parents' voices: "Today, you will see a great man. Today, you will see history made."

Cesar Chavez glances over, notices the kids, smiles and motions them forward. As if a school bell has rung, they burst ahead and play with the strings holding a dozen balloons that say "Boycott Grapes." Chavez is delighted. He has always tried to run the United Farm Workers like a community. If he arrived at a strike and didn't see women and children walking the picket line, his first questions to the men were always, "What's wrong? Where are your families?"

"We have returned to Delano to declare economic warfare on the growers," Chavez says. He has come here to kick off a new boycott of table grapes. "Today, we are going back to where we left off in 1975."

The first time Chavez led a boycott of grapes, Janis Joplin was singing her anguished blues and Jimi Hendrix was performing miracles on the Fender Stratocaster. The Vietnam War had filled a generation with moral outrage, and plenty of it spilled over to the farm workers' movement.

Today, kids are under a spell cast by Michael Jackson; college students want to be MBA's; and yesterday's activists have become young professionals, raising children, paying mortgages, striving to make their bodies and careers as sleek and powerful as a BMW. But although times have changed, Chavez is convinced that people haven't. He would not be attempting a new boycott if he didn't think today's Yuppies would support *La Causa*, The Cause, like the flower children of yesterday.

“If this doesn’t work, it’s the end for this union,” Chavez says. “It’s a risk, but the moment you stop taking risks, you’re dead.”

Chavez’s archenemies, the growers, are convinced the boycott is doomed, as out of sync with the times as psychedelic rock.

“It’s the ‘80s, not the ‘60s,” says Ed Thomas, director of the south Central Farmers Committee, an organization of 45 table-grape growers and shippers that has been fighting the UFW since the mid-1960s. “Tactics that worked 20 years ago aren’t going to work today.”

“The days of *The Grapes and Wrath* are over,” adds Dan Haley, head lobbyists for the Western Growers Association, an organization of tree-fruit and vegetable growers. “Chavez’s day is over.”

Thomas and Haley are right: The new grape boycott is likely to fail. But not because the tactic is outdated. As usual, Chavez is two or three steps ahead of the growers. The high-tech campaign he has planned against table grape growers is as ‘80s as Geraldine Ferraro. Ironically, the boycott will fail for reasons that have little to do with techniques and much to do with Cesar Chavez.

Three men are generally credited with founding the UFW: Chavez, the late Rev. Jim Drake, and Gilbert Padilla. From the start, they agreed that Chavez should be the union’s leader. He was a Mexican whose parents were migrants; he was Catholic; he had charisma and spoke well; and he was tough, with the stamina to endure great pressure and endless traveling.

“We built a monster that came and ate us up,” Padilla says now, speaking of Cesar Chavez. “He’s destroyed a lot of people, people who came to the union with their hearts in their hands, wanting only to organize a group of people in our society who were getting screwed.”

Great leaders do not turn into monsters overnight. The best way to find out what happened is to begin where the union began, in Delano.

### **Viva La Causa!**

It is fitting that Chavez returned to Delano last month to launch a new grape boycott. His family moved to San Jose in the late ‘30s. His father Librado died here at age 101; his 95-year-old mother Juana still lives here. It was in the Los Angeles area in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s that Chavez first emerged as a leader in the

Community Service Organization, then the state's major Hispanic organization. But the name Cesar Chavez will always be linked with Delano, a town of warehouses and semi-trucks in the middle of the largest vineyards in the world.

There had been plenty of attempts to organize the people that growers treated like sub-human extensions of a short hoe. The UFW was the first to succeed. That's why someday there may be a plaque outside the tiny, boarded-up adobe building, the California equivalent of a log cabin, at First and Albany where the UFW was born in 1962.

But there is really no need for a plaque, because down the road a few miles, past endless rows of grapevines, is a far better monument. Near the UFW medical clinic stands Agbayani Village, a fine retirement home for the Filipino farm workers who started the original grape strike in September 1965.

"Why did we begin the strike?" Willie Barientos, one of the first strikers, asks rhetorically. He inches his small body close to a visitor and raises a finger in front of his leathery, deeply lined face. "Because we wanted to be treated like human beings like everyone else! We said to the growers, 'You are millionaires. And who built you up? Us! We planted your grapes and cared for them like babies. We want a share, a little share, not too much, just a share.' That's why we joined Cesar Chavez!"

The grape strike lasted 54 months, but was merely the opening battle of a war that has gone on for 22 years. Growers and the UFW still despise each other as much as any two groups in this country.

"It's like a holy war," says Herb Benham, a large multi-crop grower in Kern County who has been in business 35 years. "If you've ever been there when a crop is about ready to harvest and a grower gets hit with a strike, you know what I mean. They all feel that Chavez is trying to put them under."

To Chavez, growers created and try to perpetuate a system that enslaves farm workers. His mission is to overturn that system and make growers pay, both financially and spiritually, for treating farm workers like farm tools.

"There are two distinct grower mentalities," Chavez says. "The big multinational corporations are business-minded. Their attitude is, 'Show me some strengths and I'll sign with you.' Big corporations are a lot easier for us to deal with than the guy who inherited his farm. He's paternal. His mentality is, 'Any worker who joins a union is against me.' There's some racism in it, too. It's not overt—many times they don't even recognize it themselves. It's 'They're Mexicans. They've always been

Mexicans. Mexicans are powerless.’ He takes the union as a challenge to his manhood.”

The holy war’s opening battles produced some of the memorable scenes of the 1960s:

- Walter Reuther came to Delano in 1965, wearing a blazer over a sweater, a white shirt and tie, looking more like a college professor than what he was: the president of the United Auto Workers and one of the two most powerful labor leaders in America. Reuther led a march through the streets of Delano that threw the weight of big labor behind Chavez’s struggling little union and focused national attention on the farm workers.
- The day Robert Kennedy came to Delano at the beginning of the California Democratic primary in 1968, Chavez ended a 25-day fast for non-violence. Kennedy pinned a UFW button in his lapel and appeared with the weakened Chavez to make a speech that fused the farm workers’ struggle with the movement to end the Vietnam War. The UFW began a massive voter-registration drive that brought 200,000 people to the polls for the first time. Kennedy beat Eugene McCarthy by 136,000 votes.

But even with big-name support, strikes aren’t won unless labor can sever management’s supply of workers. In a steel strike the union throws a picket line outside the gates and terrifies everyone who tries to cross. But grape fields go on for miles’ there are no fences; and growers have an endless pool of illegal aliens begging for work. In a stroke of genius, Chavez came up with the secondary boycott, the first new labor tactic in decades.

“It came from not having a choice,” Chavez says today. “Either you fight and fight till the bitter end, or you don’t get into it at all.”

The secondary boycott was aimed at supermarkets as much as at grape growers. College kids cut classes to march and carry picket signs with farm workers in front of chain stores. It was bad for business and the more the chains felt the heat, the more they pressured growers.

The boycott worked. In July 1970, every grape grower in the state but one signed a collective-bargaining agreement with the UFW. Lettuce growers signed contracts a few months later. UFW membership jumped from a few thousand to more than 80,000.

But growers are fighters, too, and when the UFW contracts expired three years later, the growers shocked Chavez by signing new contracts with the Teamsters. It was a brilliant move: Who could accuse growers of being anti-union when they had Teamster contracts? “The growers knew the Teamsters wouldn’t fight them,” says Paul Chavez, Cesar’s son, right-hand man and heir apparent. “Those were sweetheart deals. The Teamsters are the epitome of a sign-anybody-for-the-dues union.”

Overnight, UFW membership dropped to 2,500 and the union found itself in the strange position of picketing both growers and union workers. The Teamsters brought goons into the fields, huge men with beer guts and tattoos who patrolled in the back of flatbeds that UFW strikers called “garbage trucks.” They screamed obscenities at Chavez, spat on him, threw rocks and destroyed a car he was riding in. Chavez took the abuse with a blank face, never flinching. But when UFW members Juan De La Cruz and Nagi Daifallah were killed, Chavez wept.

The union unsheathed its moral sword and called for another international boycott, this time of grapes, lettuce and Gallo wine. Chavez toured Europe, presenting the boycott as a battle between the haves and have-nots, and was granted a private audience with Pope Paul VI at the Vatican. Longshoremen in London and Stockholm refused to unload California produce. When Gov. Edmund Brown Jr., the best political ally the UFW has ever had, was elected in 1974, he made ending the battle his first priority.

“Cesar really did have Brown under his thumb,” says Sam Kushner, a long-time UFW observer and author of the historical study *Long Road to Delano*. “When Cesar whispered, Jerry jumped.”

Brown oversaw a compromise that took several years to work out. In 1977, the Teamsters agreed to organize agriculture workers who worked inside canneries and packing sheds; the UFW got the fields. In 1978, so many union elections were being held on California farms, the UFW called off the international boycott. The ALRA removed the battle between farm workers and growers from the fields and supermarkets, and dropped it into the courtroom.

The fight has been just as hot and nasty in the courts as it was in the fields because the ALRA gives farm workers even more rights than industrial workers have under the National Labor Relations Act. Growers have never accepted the act. Instead of using the ALRA as a framework for relations with farm workers, growers fight the ALRA every step of the way. Almost every time the Agriculture Labor Relations Board (the body that administers the ALRA), rules against a grower, the grower

appeals the decision. If he loses, he appeals again, on up to the U.S. Supreme Court. Cases are routinely suspended in legal limbo for three to five years. The endless appeals, plus the confirmation last February of David Stirling as ALRB general counsel—Stirling has vowed to “end Chavez’s control of the board”—convinced Chavez to abandon the act and go back to boycotts.

“A return to the old tactics will be very healthy for the union,” says ALRB member Jerome Waldie. “There’s nothing left in the act for farm workers except hostility. Cesar put more eggs in one basket than he should have. Some of his other tools have atrophied because he was putting so much energy into the act. It turned out growers could fight better in courtroom than they could fight boycotts.”

### **The High-Tech Boycott**

The new boycott won’t be run out of Delano; it will be conducted at La Paz, the union’s headquarters since 1971. The former Kern County Tuberculosis Sanatorium, La Paz is a collection of old buildings scattered near the railroad tracks in Keene, a one-gas-station town in the stony Tehachapi Mountains, 30 miles east of Bakersfield.

As you tour La Paz it becomes apparent that the UFW is a family-run union. Chavez’s brother Richard is on the UFW executive board. Cesar’s son Anthony runs an elaborate private communications system that has satellite dishes on top of seven mountains in California. Until recently, Cesar’s son Paul was the UFW state legislative director in Sacramento; now, he is coordinating the grape boycott because “that’s where the future is and I want to be in on the ground floor.”

“Wait a minute! Slow down a little,” Paul Chavez says as the car rolls down a hill into the compound. “What’s that guy doing up there?” A Chevy pickup is parked on a ridge overlooking La Paz. The driver appears to be peering down, studying the place. A few moments later, he drives off.

“Probably nothing,” Paul says, “but you got to be watchful. My dad’s had a lot of assassination threats over the years.”

Paul leads the way up a dirt road to a battered four-room house where his father and mother, Helen, live. Outside, the two dogs Chavez takes with him on his early morning walks into the mountains have beaten the grass into dirt. Inside, a couple of granddaughters are washing lunch dishes. Chavez is in the small living room, resting in a threadbare easy chair, recovering from a bout with pneumonia. With typical tenacity, he refused to obey a doctor’s order to enter the hospital. The

inactivity is eating away at him. He is proud that he has never taken a vacation, and questions whether people who leave La Paz to go home for Christmas are dedicated enough. “Every day, you’ve got to do something to further the cause,” he says. “Every day.”

“Let’s talk about how we’re going to do the boycott,” Paul says. “Then we can go see the printing press and . . . “

“No,” Chavez interrupts, “first we’ve got to cover the tremendous re-examination our union has been through, so everyone knows what led up to this.” For the rest of the afternoon, Paul says almost nothing.

The son’s silence is a measure of the father’s strength. Chavez has a Moses-like sense of mission, an absolute certainty he is morally right. He states his case in such a compelling way, you are drawn to him. When he gets excited, Chavez pulls himself carefully out of his chair—he has suffered from a bad back for years—to pace the room. His small hands jab the air as he makes his points. Once he went on fasts so prolonged, he had to be hospitalized; today, like many another 56-year-old man, Chavez carries his weight at his thick waist. His face is beautiful, reminiscent of sepia pictures of the great Sioux chief Crazy Horse, full of strength and character, especially when he’s denouncing the growers. But when one of his granddaughters asks for a kiss, Chavez melts.

“The people who supported us before are still out there,” Chavez says. “They’ve grown up; we can’t ask them to picket. But they’ll still support us. It’s all a matter of reaching them. That’s why we’ve borrowed some techniques from the right wing. They’ve come up with some pretty good ideas.”

Chavez is gambling that the future is high-tech equipment and sophisticated marketing techniques borrowed from ultra-conservative fundraiser Richard Viguerie. Computers keep track of union members and supporters. A new printing press cranks out thousands of flyers urging shoppers to boycott grapes. A new radio station, KUFW, “Radio *Campesino*,” is fast becoming the voice of farm workers.

The new methods were tested recently in a boycott of Lucky stores that stocked Red Coach lettuce, wrapped lettuce marketed by Bruce Church, a Salinas grower and shipper. UFW computers sent questionnaires printed in the union’s shop to neighborhoods surrounding Lucky stores where people lived who, according to Paul Chavez, “would be most likely to support a boycott—Chicanos, blacks, Jews, liberals.” People who returned the questionnaires were placed on a computerized mailing list and regularly sent slick pleas for money and support. One appeal

features a close-up of the Lacoste alligator with the words, “Some labels say how far you’ve come.” Next to it is the UFW button and a caption that says, “Others say you haven’t forgotten where you’ve come from.”

The boycott worked. In January, Lucky stopped carrying Red Coach lettuce. Chavez is convinced it succeeded because instead of just asking for help, the union is giving its supporters something back. These days, the UFW operates under a new motto Chavez coined: “Our mission is food.”

“How can we expect the consumer to support us without doing something in return?” Chavez asks. “We’re not doing it out of a sense of altruism. We’re doing it because it is very practical. You’re going to see this union fighting to keep the prices consumers pay reasonable. Pretty soon we’re going to be introducing bills that forbid the use of pesticides that can’t be washed off with water. We’re going to be fighting to produce quality food. It’s a disgrace to buy peaches and oranges that are sour, tomatoes that are tasteless, because they are grown to withstand a mechanical harvester. People ask me, ‘Why all this concern? You sound like a farmer.’ It’s because we are part of a community, because we have to give something back.”

So far, so good. What Chavez says makes sense, and a visitor leaves La Paz convinced that if the Red Coach boycott worked, the table-grape boycott should succeed. But problems that will cripple the new boycott lurk beneath the surface, and they won’t be solved by computers or a printing press.

### **The Cost of Isolation**

The UFW is in bad shape today. Once, it appeared that it would become a national union. Today, it has almost no presence in Texas or Arizona or any agricultural state other than California. And it is not doing much in its own backyard. Researchers at UC Davis estimate that over 250,000 people work in California fields and orchards each year. A little over 10 percent, or about 30,000 workers, belong to the UFW. Union officials say that if they had contracts on every farm where workers have voted for union representation, and if growers didn’t tie up election results by appealing ALRB decisions forever, the union would be twice as large as it is. But that still adds up to only 60,000 workers. Most of the union’s contracts are with growers in two counties. Monterey (the majority of farms in Monterey are the large, corporate kind Chavez finds easiest to deal with) and Ventura. And the UFW is rapidly losing its citrus contracts in Ventura.

According to ALRB figures, in 1983-84 there were only 17 elections in which farm workers chose between the UFW and no union. The UFW won nine; “no union”

won eight. Only 1,400 workers, or less than 1 percent of the non-union farm workers in California, voted in the elections.

The UFW's decline in numbers and influence may be largely attributed to Chavez's concept of power. Conventional union leaders think of power in terms of ballots, dues, strikes and political contributions. Chavez has always pursued a different kind of power—spiritual power. Gandhi is both his spiritual and practical guide. Chavez saw La Paz as his version of the Mahatma's ashram: a place where the faithful could unite, plan strategy and develop spiritual strength. A devout Catholic who mediates “a minimum of an hour a day, two hours if I'm lucky,” Chavez is also strict vegetarian. He gets up every morning between 2:30 and 4 a.m. after sleeping four to six hours, meditates, then takes his walk in the mountains “to see the things you take for granted, to slow down and look at what God has made. It's a time for introspection, for reflection. I believe in a moral order. I've tested and tested the idea of truth. Gandhi says, 'Truth is God and God is truth.' I have no doubt that in the end, truth will win. It's a given. That's why you reflect; you want to make sure that truth is on your side.”

“The question for Cesar has always been, ‘How do I keep from ending up like the AFL, holding conventions at the Balmoral Hotel in Miami Beach?’ “ says one former UFW staffer. “The answer has always been, ‘A community of volunteers.’ “

For UFW staffers, moving to La Paz was like entering a seminary. It is empty up there in the Tehachapi Mountains. You can watch red-tail hawks soar in a blue sky, breathe clean air and not worry about your kids falling in with the wrong crowd. But if you want any kind of social life, if you like to go out to dinner and see a movie once in a while, you wouldn't like La Paz. The nearest town, Tehachapi, is 11 miles away, and there isn't much there but motels. To move to La Paz, union volunteers had to be willing to live on \$10 a week and dedicate their lives to the union.

Chavez's critics tell you to forget his talk about Gandhi and God. They say the real reason Chavez moved to La Paz was to consolidate his power.

“La Paz is Cesar's folly,” says Sam Kushner. “You have to be a small genius to find it. He completely isolated the union. HE did it because he's become an increasingly dominant character who will not tolerate any dissent. Cesar tries to keep everybody under his thumb, and as a result, makes a lot of mistakes.”

Watching Chavez in his office, you realize there is truth to the charge. The UFW is a very centralized union. There are no strong locals. There are no strong leaders other than Chavez. In the UFW, everybody “checks with Cesar” before making a

decision. Surrounded by the relics of La Causa—pictures of Gandhi and Robert Kennedy, frames that hold the first medical plan and the first pension checks, a short-handle hoe with a brass plate that records the date Gov. Brown outlawed use of a tool that had warped thousands of backs—Chavez spends his days on the phone. He will take a call, hang up, yell to his secretary in the next room, “Esther, get me Salinas!”, discuss strategy with Paul, talk to Salinas, then remember he wants to talk to a member of the legal staff and call its offices at the far end of the compound and ask the lawyer to come see him.

“Cesar thinks he has to be the one to make every decision, no matter how small it is,” says Lupe Sanchez, executive director of the 10,000-member Arizona Farm Workers Union. Sanchez was a UFW organizer for 10 years before breaking off to start a new union in 1978. “Once, I was going to Mexico to do some organizing. I filled out a mileage-estimate form, and Cesar argued with me about the estimate for 45 minutes. I thought, ‘Why the hell is the leader of a powerful union wasting his time on little stuff like this?’

“It was brilliant in the beginning to build up a leader because farm workers identify with leaders,” Sanchez concludes. “But over a period of time, that should have changed. Emphasis should have been placed on organization, not the person. Cesar deeply believes that the man is the movement. He is the God of the Movement who must control every aspect. He thinks that if he’s not there, the movement is gone.”

The move to La Paz also removed the union from what a UC Berkeley researcher calls “the Mexican Favor Network.” The majority of farm workers come from small villages in Mexico where relationships are built on an exchange of good turns, a “you do me a favor, I’ll do you one” basis. For years, UFW staffers worked hard to help farm workers and be part of the favor network. Chavez used to travel constantly from farm to farm. Workers felt they knew him, felt he was fighting for them, so they returned the favor by supporting his union. In recent years, farm workers haven’t seen much of Chavez. The relocation to La Paz has had a devastating effect on the UFW: “The union isn’t around,” says Gilbert Padilla, who worked with Chavez from 1955 to 1980. “They have two contracts in Fresno county; *two contracts* in the richest agricultural county in the world, and nobody’s out there working to get more.”

Since the late ‘70s, the UFW has been losing contracts to labor contractors, largely because contractors furnish workers at lower cost and without a union contract. Labor contractors are able to recruit workers (and convince them not to join the union) because contractors have remained part of the Mexican network. They come from the same villages as the workers.

“Farmers found they could do the job a lot quicker, better and cheaper with labor contractors than they could with the union,” says Alfonso Guilin of Limonera Company, citrus growers in Ventura County. “Owners disappear, form a co-op, and reappear under another name. That invalidates the union election and sets them free to deal with labor contractors. We’re one of the few [citrus] growers left that still have a union contract.”

“Cesar lost a lot when he moved from Delano to La Paz, “ says the Arizona Farm Workers’ Lupe Sanchez. “You can’t isolate leaders from the Mexican tradition. They don’t want to deal with staff organizers; they want to deal with you, if only to shake hands and ask about the kids. Here in Arizona, they come into the office and tell me, ‘I need this and this,’ and I get on the intercom and tell somebody on the staff, ‘Here, deal with this.’ It’s time-consuming as hell, but it’s worth it because that’s the way they want it.

“The UFW’s biggest problem is that Cesar won’t delegate authority,” Sanchez says. “He won’t set up local offices and give people the ability to make decisions. That’s why we split off. Cesar doesn’t want input; he wants to issue edicts. I worked for the UFW for 10 years for \$5 a week and I’d come back in without any discussion if Cesar would set up strong locals. People all over the country are dying to pull together and have a national organizational drive. Cesar is afraid that if he’s not in total control, people won’t be loyal. That’s not true. We’d all be loyal to Cesar.

“Somebody should sit down and talk to Cesar. He’s destroying the movement. I wish I could get him in a room for three or four hours. I betcha I could sell him. I’ve tried. He won’t return my phone calls.”

### **Playing the Game**

“Nothing is more important than community; in the end, the only thing that helps people is people,” Chavez says. But it was Chavez’s search for community that led him into a long and close association with Synanon. Chavez mistook a cult for a community. So convinced to the UFW’s problems, no one, not even people he had worked with and trusted for years, could tell him he was wrong.

Looking back, it seems incredible that a man of Chavez’s stature would get mixed up with Synanon’s founder, Charles Dederich. But when you look at what was happening to the union in 1976, the year Chavez first visited the Synanon Ranch outside Badger, a small town near the western boundary of Sequoia National Park, things begin to make sense.

In 1976, for the first time, a Chavez appeal to the public failed. He took it personally and very hard. A coalition of rural Democrats and Republicans abandoned the deal they had cut with Gov. Brown and blocked funding for the ALRA. The union hit the streets, collecting more than 300,000 signatures to get Proposition 14 on the ballot. Prop. 14 would have forced the legislature to fund the ALRA, and forbid it from changing the ALRA without first taking the amendments to the public for a vote.

The growers countered with a well-financed campaign that portrayed Prop. 14 as an invasion of private property. Because union leaders would be allowed into the fields to talk with workers, growers' ads asked, "Would you want someone coming on your property without permission?" The proposition lost by a 2-1 margin.

"Cesar was advised not to go ahead with Prop. 14," says Esther Padilla, Gilbert's wife and former UFW organizer. "You can't beat the private property rap; you know how people feel about that. But he went ahead anyway, and when he lost, it was like something clicked in Cesar. He was deeply hurt. He became paranoid. He started blaming people. Purges followed; there was a lot of scapegoating; heads rolled."

Gilbert and Esther Padilla and the others who built the UFW are hard-driving, strong-minded people. After Prop. 14 was defeated, they all had different ideas about how to attack the union's problems. The arguing never stopped. They had been at it 14 years, worked seven days a week, 18 hours a day, and the union still wasn't on solid ground. Money problems were chronic; the UFW cars didn't run; the plumbing backed up.

When Chavez visited the Synanon Ranch, he saw an organization that was bringing in millions of dollars a year. Charles Dederich was known all over the country as the man who pioneered the self-help method for drug and alcohol addiction. Synanon's cars and buses ran, and so did its limos and fleet of motorcycles. Best of all, everybody smiled. They endlessly discussed the leader's thoughts without arguing. Chavez was impressed. Here was someone who knew how to create a community.

This was before Dederich made a speech in 1977 in which he warned, "Don't mess with Synanon. You can get killed dead. Physically dead." Before Dederich pleaded no-contest to a charge of sending two "Imperial Marines" to put a 4½-foot rattlesnake in the mailbox of Paul Morantz, a Los Angeles attorney who had won a \$300,000 default judgment against Synanon. Before Dederich and 11 other Synanon leaders were arrested on charges of securities fraud.

“What led me to Synanon was curiosity,” Chavez says in retrospect. “I’m partial to the idea of kibbutz. A kibbutz and Synanon were both communities experimenting with different kinds of lifestyles. Synanon was not a religious community in those days. They were doing things which interested me. They did good therapeutic work with drug addicts and convicts. Nobody can take that away from them.”

Chavez accepted many things from Synanon—“buses, food, cars,” according to Gilbert Padilla—but the most significant was the “Synanon Game.” The game is stylized character assassination’ one person goes into the center of a circle and the others attack, abandoning the constraints that keep people from telling others what they *really* think of them. The idea is that when people discover how others feel about them, they are forced to face who they really are, and are stronger for it.

“We experimented with the game,” Chavez says. “It didn’t work for us.”

Former UFW staffers remember the Synanon Game with pain and are reluctant to talk about it. Those that will do so say the UFW staff played it for four years. Some former staffers believe the game was part of Chavez’s search for community, his willingness to take risks, try new and unusual things. Others say Chavez used the game to attack people he perceived as enemies.

“The Synanon Game was a disaster,” Gilbert Padilla says. “Cesar didn’t want to organize. He wanted to play the Synanon Game and tell us how to cure headaches. He wanted us to speak with ‘One voice, one policy,’ like the Moonies. I resented the game a lot. I refused to play. We all voted against it but we still had to play. You were forced into it.

“Cesar became paranoid,” Padilla continues. He started looking for spies. He had a cadre of people who would attack anybody he told them to. He used them and the game to control people. He began to see things that didn’t exist. He thought the Communist Party was trying to destroy the union. Anybody who said no to him became a spy. You couldn’t leave La Paz without permission. It was like being in a prison.”

But it wasn’t the Synanon Game alone that drove key UFW staffers from the union between 1980-81. Rather, it was an emphasis on playing the game and forming a spiritual community *at the expense* of organizing. There are two ways to look at what happened. One is that bloodletting is inevitable in any union.

“How many bulls can you have in one china shop?” says a former staffer. “I thought Cesar was very fair about it. In other unions, you arrive one morning to find your files padlocked and somebody telling you you’ve got 24 hours to get out. And there are other unions where you might end up floating face down in a river.”

The second view is that Chavez destroyed the UFW by forcing out people who wanted to run it like a trade union. Everything was in place for a big contract drive: a sympathetic governor, a favorable law, a crack staff. But when Imperial Valley lettuce growers refused to bargain in 1979 and UFW striker Rufino Contreras was killed, Chavez pretty much stayed in La Paz. He did not become the presence he had been during the first grape strike or the ’73 battle with the Teamsters. During this period, Chavez’s first concern was consolidating power. Whether he did this out of fear, or because his need to decide on every detail kept him in his office, or because he wanted to turn La Paz into an ashram with himself as an American Gandhi doesn’t really matter. What matters is that he lost his best people, particularly Jerry Cohen, Eliseo Medina, Marshall Ganz and Gilbert Padilla.

- UFW Chief General Counsel Jerry Cohen is a brilliant lawyer who helped write the ALRA with Gov. Brown and then-Sec. of Agriculture Rose Bird. Cohen resigned from the UFW because he didn’t want to move from Salinas to La Paz and live on \$10 a week, as Chavez ordered the legal staff to do, and because he wanted to devote more time to his family. Most of Cohen’s staff followed him.

As for the others, “Cesar made us resign,” Gilbert Padilla says. “We didn’t want to leave. He forced us out.”

- Marshall Ganz was the best negotiator the UFW ever had. Ganz is famous for working 18 hours a day, seven days a week, for weeks at a time. He was an expert at forming ranch committees, dealing with foremen, and calming the farm workers’ understandable fear of losing their jobs. UFW strikes were effective because when the workers went out, they stayed out. And they stayed out in large part because Marshall Ganz was in the fields and on the picket lines, convincing them they were doing the right thing. A major reason why the union is not doing much organizing today is that Ganz is gone.

- Eliseo Medina was the power behind Chavez, the man who made sure things got done. He remembered details, kept track of people, came up with ideas that kept growers scrambling to react. “He was a master administrator, a great talent,” Padilla says. “He made it work. People loved working with him.” Medina could have

run the union while Chavez concentrated on being a catalyst for social causes. Instead, he is now working for the Texas State Employees Union in Austin, Texas.

- Gilbert Padilla is a great negotiator. Tough and savvy, he has an insight into growers that has been refined by over 20 years of opposing them. Chavez is not very effective at the bargaining table because he is not good at camouflaging his intense dislike of growers. He storms out of sessions outraged. When Padilla was in the union, however, the two developed a “good cop, bad cop” routine: Chavez would leave a negotiating session in a moral huff; two weeks would go by and the grower would hear nothing. Then Padilla would call the grower. “Let’s work this out,” he’d say. “You and I will settle it and I’ll take care of Cesar.” Now, when negotiations break down, there is nobody to repair them. Nobody in the UFW has the growers’ trust; no union official knows the growers well enough to take them out to lunch and get things rolling again.

Chavez has recently restructured the union. Organizers were once assigned to areas such as Salinas, where a number of crops are grown. Now they are assigned to specific crops, such as grapes and lettuce. Everybody at La Paz is convinced the new organization is the key to solving the union’s negotiating and organizing problems, but if so, one wonders why it took Chavez 22 years to figure that out.

“It’s not organization, it’s people,” says Lupe Sanchez. “Growers tell me they never know who to deal with in the UFW. The personnel keeps changing. Cesar is going to have to come to the conclusion that you can’t run a union paying people \$10 a week. He’s got to bring in people who can read and administer contracts. He can’t get sending out green kids. The growers take one look at them and say, ‘I’m going to fight forever.’” “

“I don’t think Chavez has made that much headway in the last five to seven years,” adds grower Herb Benham. “He could have if he’d been better organized. The union isn’t all that good about administering contracts. I’ve heard that complaint over and over again from people who had resigned themselves to the union and who, off the record, supported what Chavez was trying to do. He fell flat on his face when it came to administering.”

Chavez denies that losing the people who helped him build the union has hurt the UFW. On losing his legal staff, Chavez says, “One of the big dangers to unions are attorneys. By training, they are bound to play it safe. I lay the law down: ‘You don’t advise me what to do, you tell me how to get my ass out of trouble.’ The moment you ask attorneys, ‘How do you feel about this?’ they find reasons why you

shouldn't do it. You stop taking risks. We got caught in that situation. We went out and rebuilt the legal staff even better than before."

On losing people like Marshall Ganz and Gilbert Padilla, Chavez says, "We've been through a traumatic experience because of my insistence that we look at things, really look at them. I said, 'There's got to be more to it than this [organizing farm workers].' People made fun of me, said I sat on the mountain too long. They felt threatened. Gilbert Padilla didn't want to change. Gilbert's answer for everything was 'We've got to organize.' I said, 'Life is more than organizing.' Those people who stayed believe things had to be different. We have a team today. The workers are better off because it happened. You're going to see this union come back in a big way."

### **"The End of the Union?"**

Chavez says that if the grape boycott doesn't work, "it's the end of this union," and an early indication that he may be in trouble is that this time around, the growers are on the offensive.

"There are over 60,000 workers harvesting table grapes. Chavez represents about 300 of them," says Ed Thomas of the South Central Farmers Committee. "After 20 years, that's all he's got, even with an ALRB that's biased in his favor. Whose fault is that? It's his! He can't blame the growers. If the workers wanted to join the UFW, there is no way growers could stop them. Let Chavez try and explain that to the public."

Chavez doesn't want to explain that, and it's not much fun asking him to do so. He sits behind his desk, intent, eager to explain union strategy, but instantly defensive when criticized. It is much easier to talk about the good old days, when Chavez led the good fight for equality.

Chavez brought the farm workers a long way. Even the growers recognize that. "We have to take some responsibility for creating Cesar Chavez," says Dan Haley of the Western Growers Association. "We let some conditions last too long. There's no question farm workers are better off because Chavez came along."

When the UFW won its first contracts 14 years ago, farm workers averaged \$1.70 an hour. Today, they average \$5.15 an hour, and piece-rate workers who harvest lettuce and cantaloupe can earn up to \$20 an hour. More than that, he formed farm workers into a constituency, forced the legislature to define their legal rights, and turned the powerless into a force to be reckoned with.

“The future is in the hands of the agricultural worker,” says state Sen. Art Torres (D-Los Angeles), a former Chavez political ally (see sidebar). “Hispanics are getting political clout. The people in the cities will never forget their brothers and sisters in the fields. It would be far better for the growers to make peace now rather than pay the price down the road, when the coalition grows into power.”

Torres is emerging as a leader of urban Hispanics. Whether Chavez retains the leadership of farm workers depends on what he can do for them tomorrow—not what he did yesterday. If he doesn’t attract new members and win new contracts, the UFW will shrivel on the vine. It would be nice to think that the old warrior can come back and be a leader of the new Hispanic coalition, but the people who helped Chavez build the UFW say that’s not going to happen.

“There’s no hope,” Padilla says, “Cesar won’t change. He’ll just get worse. I don’t know why he doesn’t want to organize. I don’t know why he wants a non-functioning union. All I know is what really hurts is what might have been. We had a great thing going there for a lot of years.”

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### **CHAVEZ’S SACRAMENTO STREET FIGHTS**

Cesar Chavez has never thought of politics as the art of compromise.

“Politics is like a street fight,” he says. “You get hit, you’ve got to hit back. You may lose, but you’ll get some respect. The other pals will think twice before crossing you.”

The UFW has been very successful in Sacramento, partly because Chavez can ring the capitol with pickets and has instant access to the media, and partly because he has cash, lots of cash.

The money comes from an innovative fund-raising technique that the ALRB has ruled legal. One day a year, picked at random—usually a Sunday when most workers are off—is designated Citizen Participation Day. Although union members don’t work, growers pay a day’s wages for each employee into the Rufino Contreras Political Action Fund. (Contreras was a farm worker killed during the 1979 lettuce strike.) The growers hate it. “It’s a political slush fund that growers pay for that isn’t helping union members,” says Ed Thomas of the South Central Farmers’ Committee.

From the Contreras Fund, the union contributed \$750,000 to Democratic candidates during the last elections. Over lunch at the Fung Lum restaurant on Bascom, Paul Chavez, Cesar's son and until recently the union's state legislative director, gave Assembly Speaker Willie Brown \$250,000 to for the Democrats. An additional \$150,000 went to Senate President David Roberti for the same purpose. From the union's point of view the money was well spent.

"In the Assembly, pro-[grower] bills go to the Labor and Employment Committee. In the Senate, they go to the Industrial Relations Committee. Both are stacked against growers, both are pro-Chavez," says Michael Payne, vice president and operations manager of Bruce Church, a Salinas-based lettuce grower and shipper. "Chavez's money buys preservation of the ALRA in its present form. Any other pro-ag bills that Cesar okays go to the Ag Committees in the Assembly and Senate, which have always been pro-ag."

But Chavez's "politics is a street fight" attitude is beginning to hurt him in Sacramento. When eight members of the Assembly Committee on Agriculture signed a letter suggesting that all current members of the ALRB resign to give the board "a fresh start," the UFW reprinted the letter, stamped "Treason to farm workers and all labor" on it in a black box, and mailed it all over the state. That kind of overreaction is making Chavez's Democratic allies uncomfortable, and they should be uneasy, because Chavez intends to nail any Democrat who he thinks crosses him.

A case in point is Sen. Henry Mello (D.-Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz). "Three years ago, the growers and right wing went after Mello," Chavez says. "He'd been pretty good to the growers but they turned on him. He had no choice but to come to us for help. We gave him money and he won by the skin of his teeth."

But Mello incurred Chavez's wrath by voting for the confirmation of David Stirling as ALRB general counsel. The union retaliated by running a Peace and Freedom candidate against Mello and mailing a flyer attacking the senator to 100,000 of his constituents. It wasn't simple vindictiveness; the attack on Mello was the first step of a three-part strategy. Work against and defeat rural Democrats who vote pro-agriculture; endure their Republican successors for a term; then elect Democrats who will vote the union's way.

"We're going after bad Democrats," Chavez says. "We'll run third-party candidates against them and let Republicans win. Then we'll go to other Demos and say, 'We'll

do it to you, too.’ It will be better to get Republicans in there until we can get real good Democrats elected.”

Sen. Mello was surprised and rather shaken by the ferocity of the UFW’s attack on him.

“Trying to defeat me and other Democrats is suicide,” Mello counters. “Once Republicans get in, you’ll never get them out. This year, the anti-farm-worker bills were defeated in committee. If the Democrats lose the majority, those bills will sail through and Deukmejian will sign them.

“I’ve known Dave Stirling for eight years,” Mello says. “He’ll do a good job. I didn’t think the UFW made a case against him. My voting record is 22-1 for labor. The AFL-CIO endorsed me, even though I voted for Stirling. Other labor unions are more sophisticated, more tolerant than the UFW. They know you can’t please them 100 percent of the time. But Chavez expects 100 percent. I can’t even please my wife 100 percent of the time.”

Chavez’s street-fight mentality has cost him his best ally in Sacramento, Sen. Art Torres (D.-Los Angeles). A fine politician, Torres is emerging as a leader of urban Hispanics. A former UFW volunteer, Torres would seem to be natural ally for Chavez. But that’s not the way it is.

“Torres has been very arrogant and it pisses us off,” Paul Chavez says. “We’ll never make peace. I’m waiting to hit back at him.”

The bad blood goes back to 1979, when former Assembly Majority Leader Howard Berman was trying to wrest the speaker-ship from Leo McCarthy. Torres and Richard Alatorre (D-Los Angeles) supported McCarthy, but switched to Berman after Chavez asked them to. When they saw that Berman was going to lose, the two shifted their support to Willie Brown without telling Chavez. Chavez was outraged. Alatorre worked hard to get back on good terms with the union, but Torres, according to Paul Chavez, got nasty. “He told us, ‘You can’t tell me how to run my career.’ “

The union hit back for supporting Alex Garcia, a generally conservative candidate, against Torres when he ran for the state Senate in 1982. Torres countered with a right to the jaw. Gov. Brown had nominated Nancy Kirk to be general counsel of the ALRB. Kirk is pro-labor and would have vigorously enforced the ALRB. Nineteen senators voted to confirm her; she needed 21. Torres’ vote was number 20, another senator had promised to vote for her when the count reached 20. It

never did, and time ran out before Brown could make another appointment. That left the door open for Deukmejian to appoint David Stirling. “We’d have had Kirk if Torres had voted for her,” says one capitol observer.

“It was macho. Art wanted us to see the full range of his moods,” says Paul Chavez. “He probably thought there would be a second chance to vote for Kirk and he would have supported us then.”

“I tried talking to them, but there was no listening at the other end,” Torres says. “I’ll continue to support their issues. I’m not concerned about dialogue; I’m concerned about issues. I worked closely with them in the opposition to Stirling. I don’t harbor grudges.”

The UFW, though, does harbor grudges.

“Torres called, saying he wanted help opposing Stirling,” Paul Chavez says. “It was the first time we’d talked since Berman. He did it as a gesture, just went through the motions. The outcome would have been the same no matter what he did. No deal has been cut.”

### **THE ALRA BACKFIRES: HOW A PRO-LABOR LAW CREATED A JUDICIAL LOGJAM**

Easily the most controversial law on the California books, the Agriculture Labor Relations Act was passed “to ensure peace in the agricultural fields by guaranteeing justice for all agricultural workers and stability in labor relations.” Language like that is one reason there have been so many fights over the ALRA. Growers charge that the act is clearly biased in favor of farm workers. “The law labels the growers the bad guy and steps in as an active ally of Cesar Chavez,” says Michael Payne, vice president and operations manager of Bruce Church, a Salinas lettuce grower and shipper.

There is no question that the pro-farm-worker bias in the ALRA was intended by the people who wrote the bill. For example, farm workers not only got the right to vote for union representation by secret ballot, but the ALRA also says that after a majority of workers votes to have a union election, that election must be held within seven days. In the case of industrial union elections governed by the National Labor Relations Act, months, sometimes years, pass between the vote and the actual election.

What’s more, if the Agriculture Labor Relations Board, the body that administers the ALRA, rules that a grower has not bargained in good faith, the grower must pay

“make-whole” penalties. Make whole is the difference between what laborers actually earned and *what they would have earned* if they had worked under a union contract. Make wholes can add up to serious money. In the Abatti Case, an Imperial Valley grower has been ordered to pay over \$10 million in make-whole penalties.

Eighty-five percent of the charges filed with the ALRB general counsel are made by workers against growers. If the general counsel decides the charges merit a hearing, he issues a complaint. The hearing is presided over by an administrative-law judge, one who hears labor cases, with witnesses placed under oath. The judge writes a decision. The party who loses can appeal the ruling to the ALRB. The ALRB rules on the case, and the board’s ruling can then be appealed to the California Court of Appeals, and so on up to the U.S. Supreme Court.

But in practice, the system has not worked all to the good of the union. Millions of dollars have been levied in make-whole fines, but so far, no grower has paid a dime. Growers endlessly appeal the decisions of the ALRB. And although the ALRB has been upheld in 93 percent of its cases, most growers would rather go through the appeals process and pay lawyers than negotiate with the union. Cases routinely drag on for three to five years. The Abatti case, for example, goes back to 1978. It went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where the ALRB decision was upheld. David Stirling, the general counsel appointed by Gov. Deukmejian stepped in and reduced the make-whole from \$10 million to \$1.76 million. The five-member ALRB unanimously rejected Stirling’s settlement; one member, Jerome Waldie, called it “a sellout.” Now, another set of ALRB hearings is being held to determine a new figure. The grower or the union has the right to appeal the board’s findings, and the court cycle will begin anew.

“To depend on those bureaucrats to decide the future of the union was the worst thing we could have done,” Chavez says. “There’s no excuse for taking three, four and five years to make a decision. It’s a time-consuming monster, and time is always on the side of the employer. By the time the decision is made, the workers have been wiped out, fired and replaced.”

Two things finally convinced Chavez the act was useless. The first was the Senate’s confirmation of David Stirling as ALRB general counsel. The general counsel not only prosecutes cases before the ALRB, he decides which cases are presented to the board. Stirling has vowed he will “end Chavez’s control of the board.” Chavez regards his appointment as “a betrayal of farm workers.”

The second was Gov. Deukmejian’s veto of a \$1.1 million budget item that would have funded an ALRB compliance-enforcement division to dun growers who have not paid make-whole fines.

“We’ve got a governor who believes in tough law-and-order prosecution of everybody but campaign contributors,” says Jerome Waldie. “He replaced an aggressive prosecuting general counsel with a softie. Stirling has absolutely politicized the agency. He is an instrument of the administration’s policy to weaken the act to any extent possible. He runs around the state talking to farmers. I don’t know how you prosecute people you go to dinner with. He’s hustling for a higher political office.”

Stirling has been speaking to pro-grower groups like California Women in Agriculture. He says he has yet to speak to a pro-labor or UFW group only because he has not been asked to. Stirling’s goal, he says, is to make the administration of the ALRA “professional and even-handed.”

“Many of the ALRB employees have had an affinity for the UFW movement, for La Causa,” Stirling says. “I’m not attempting to make the agency pro-grower. That would be as harmful as the pro-union bias of the past. I’m simply trying to get the boat to the middle of the river. To people on one shore, it looks like I’m going to the other side.”

Pro-union ALRB members still outnumber pro-grower members 3-2, but Chavez insists that there’s “no way we’ll get a fair shake as long as Stirling is there. We’ve got to forget about it and hit them in the pocketbooks, where it hurts. We’ve got to go back to the boycott.”

(This article: “Cesar Chavez: Is Anyone Following The Leader?” was originally published in WEST of the San Jose Mercury News on August 19, 1984.)