

George Nee, “Chavez Was Right!” 1984

Chavez Was Right!

By George Nee

(Note: Mr. Nee is currently secretary treasurer of the Rhode Island AFL-CIO)

There are no shortcuts. It doesn't matter if you're building up an athletic team, a community organization, or a labor union. Not many people are willing to put in the four or five years of groundwork they need before they're able to do the things they're really aiming for. In organizing, there are few quick victories, and even when they come they're likely to lead to defeats unless the organization is well grounded. I don't think many people have a concept of time, a concept of history.

Chavez and the Farm Workers in Delano did. They knew there was a long struggle with much sacrifice ahead. They never expected victories in the short term, never even aimed for them. One thing I have learned from the farm workers is to pace myself, and to have faith that we will win, even if the successes don't come for a long time. The Farm Workers' concept is rooted in the history that it's going to be a long struggle. I'll tell you a little about myself and what I've learned—from my own experience and from my association with the Farm Workers.

Back in 1968, when I was still in school in Boston, I met some farm workers on a picket line. I was impressed and I decided I could learn more from them than at school. Within six months I started working full-time with the Farm Workers, mostly in New England. In 1971, I left and started the Rhode Island Workers' Association. We were an unemployment rights organization. What we learned from the farm workers was that you could not just focus on issues without also taking care of people's individual problems. We didn't just work on the larger issues through action and demonstration. We did it by building in a service component. We did unemployment appeals, food stamp appeals; we developed the organization out of one-to-one contacts. And we got money and technical help from outsiders who felt that we were an important element in righting injustices.

I stayed with it for years. By 1975, though, it was pretty clear that we hadn't really found a way to establish a permanent force for social and economic justice. First of all, there was too much turnover, it was very unstable. One-to-one services don't build permanence unless each of these “ones” takes personal responsibility for other

people. The funding was always a real circus and I just didn't feel that we were making any progress—or that I was progressing as an individual. I kind of reached a crossroads. So when Chavez's son-in-law, an old friend, called me and asked if I'd come out to California to work with the Farm Workers, it sounded great. It was a good chance to make a change and learn something.

I had been in touch with Chavez over the years. He was aware of the work we were doing in the Rhode Island Workers Association and was always very supportive. Chavez feels an obligation to repay the help that the Farm Workers union has received from all of the various church and labor organizations and community organizations throughout the years. The one way he feels that he can repay that debt is to help train organizers.

I spent forty or fifty days with Chavez, walking the highways. Chavez had committed himself to a 1,000 mile pilgrimage. During the day we marched and at night we spoke at rallies. The law had just been changed. Provisions under the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 and the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 had finally been extended to farm workers. It had taken 12 years of patient education, extensive grass roots action, and effective lobbying. This march was designed to educate farm workers all along the valley to their rights to organize, and how to conduct elections.

Working with Chavez and talking with his organizers and union members helped me clarify my own concerns. I discovered that here, 3000 miles away from Rhode Island and in another state with a different population, some of the same problems and some of the same principles of organizing applied. I began to see that the point that I had got to, after five years of doing community organizing, was pretty much the same point that Chavez's organizing group had reached when it was at the crossroads of becoming the Farm Workers union. I felt that our group in Rhode Island had to transform itself also. It was interesting to talk with Chavez about what happened when the Farm Workers changed. His staff had the same fears, the same reluctance to try something new. I think there are some universal problems that exist and are not related solely to farm workers in California.

I realized that we had to change the Association from a nice guy organization where we gave help to anyone who walked in the door and where most of the financial support came from well wishers on the outside, to a totally self supporting organization. When I returned to Rhode Island and tested out some of these ideas, I ran into a lot of reluctance. Even some of our most steady supporters betrayed some pretty condescending attitudes towards the poor. Like on the issue of paying dues. They said poor people can't afford it or won't do it. Well, that's a lot of shit.

Poor people can drink, they can smoke, they can waste a lot of money on other things, too. And they can pay dues, if they believe in something.

At that point our attitude became kind of cold. I had a couple of people who came into the office who thought of me as their private social worker. When they had a problem, they'd come and they'd want me to help them. I was pretty good at getting people straightened out or winning appeals. When I said "I won't work for you any more unless you pay dues," they said that I'd sold out and didn't care about the poor. You must be willing to take that kind of crap from people. You must have a certain faith that what you are doing is correct, and let the chips fall where they may after that.

I even had problems with the staff. They liked being helpers, doing good. But doing good all by itself doesn't build a power base and it doesn't necessarily build up people's capacities to do good on their own behalf.

So in 1976 I left my position as director of the Association and started a union called the Rhode Island Workers Union. I'd made a decision that we should start a union for people who no one else was organizing or even wanted to organize. I started with no members, with no money, and with my present wife (we weren't married at that time) supporting me for the first two years because we didn't have enough money to pay me. We were able to use some of the money we'd gotten from churches to pay for rent, the food, and paper supplies. Where we differed from the Association was in our insistence that members had to support the union with money as well as time, and in the issues we set for our agendas. After five years of working in the area, we began to see the kinds of common problems that people had on the job—like unjust firings, lack of health insurance, and poor wages.

There is a lot of slop being thrown out about poverty being glamorized and romanticized. It is basically a lack of money. If you give people money who have no money they will fix their house and have some money to take care of their kids—put clothes on them and feed them. All they need is money. They do not need a lot of charity. They need some goddamn decent wages. We decided to go after the three largest groups of unorganized workers: the jewelry industry that had 30,000 low income workers, underpaid workers in the health care industry, and office workers. We decided to do it on our own, without any affiliation with national unions. Like the farm workers, we realized that we had to build up our own strength first, then we could talk to others.

We had a lot of contacts in the community and we still do the service work that we were doing during the Rhode Island Association days. We learned that instead of just saying "We will help you with your appeal" we could say "Listen! The real

answer to your problem is to organize to get a contract on the job. Then you can't be fired. Then you can get some health insurance benefits." This is a serious problem in Rhode Island because a lot of workers don't have health care benefits provided by their employer.

Our union has been involved in more organizing drives in this state than any other union even though we have only just over a thousand members. In six years we've been involved in 25 elections, and our record of wins is a little over 50 percent. Our biggest frustration is people quitting. If you start off with an organizing committee of 10, you usually have 5 people by election time. People will quit when the heat gets on because the bosses make it very tough.

It took us 6 years to get the first contract. I was fully prepared if I got the first contract in less than 10 years to consider that a success in an industry that has never been organized. We've learned a lot out of our elections and even our lost strikes. Just last month, we organized a place where we lost an election in 1978. It took us four years of going to the courts before we could finally bargain. We just received our first contract for 85 workers in a jewelry factory. The thing I had to keep remembering during those years was that once the auto worker was also unorganized. If they succeeded, we could too. I learned from Chavez that there are no unsuccessful strikes. "Strikes aren't lost," Chavez taught me, "They are abandoned." You don't lose when you don't get what you aimed for. You chalk it up to experience and start rethinking your strategy. You have to think. You have to get the right information. You have to keep people's spirits up and keep them focused on the end goals. It takes persistence. Like I said: there are no short-cuts.

It's one thing to say the word "persistence" and another thing to live it for four years. The hardest thing in organizing is to develop a realistic time perspective. You are always asking yourself if you are in the middle of a success or the middle of a failure. Because if you look back on all the struggles for social and economic justice, whether it's a fight over minimum wage or child labor, or women's right to vote and all the decent social and labor legislation that's been passed, someone just didn't come up one day and say let's do this. Those people must have asked themselves after four or five years. "Is this thing ever going to work? Or are we in the middle of a real losing campaign?" It requires constant research, analysis and thought.

In the beginning, I thought it would be easy to make the transition from an association to a union. I will tell you now, the problems are ten times as hard and the stakes are ten times as high. People who have nothing and never did aren't likely to stay with it unless it becomes a movement kind of thing with them. They have to not only believe they can win, which means they've got to have had some life

experiences with success, and they have to believe in the justness of their cause. They have to be able to get mad. Maybe that's why we sometimes had more success with foreign-born workers than with the native-born. We had a strike where there were 100 Hispanics and 100 "anglos." The Hispanic workers struck and stood out to the person. For people who are here illegally and in many cases living hand to mouth to support themselves, three or four weeks out of work is risky and it feels like an eternity. But we got terrific support from the community. When it comes right down to it, a lot of folks are against discrimination. And it helps a lot when you discover that other people believe in your cause too.

In looking back, I am amazed at some of the things we have been involved in. We now have a self-sufficient labor organization of 1,100 dues paying members. Like the Farm Workers, we're now in the AFL-CIO. We represent 20 percent of the nursing home industry in the state of Rhode Island. We've made significant changes for those workers and introduced concepts into the industry of better staffing. Our members are on the average paid \$1.00 an hour above the minimum wage in a traditionally minimum wage industry. They have family health care coverage for the first time. I feel proud that we have some significant improvements. A friend of mine who is an accountant for a major jewelry company has told me as a result of our two organizing drives and our one strike, that many of the major personnel directors of major jewelry companies have sat down and are starting to improve wages, benefits and working conditions in an attempt to head-off unionization. We really didn't lose the strike!

Still our biggest problem is people quitting; not just the union, but the job too. The average employees we are after may have been employed 7 to 10 times before. They feel that if they quit work they hurt the boss. It is a twisted logic. They don't realize that they own their own labor when they say things like: "I showed them, I didn't give any notice and I quit." They don't realize that the bosses encourage turnover because when people have been around, they get to know a place and feel entitled to more. If you leave because you didn't get the raise you asked for, it just plays into the boss' hands.

Organizing a work force means educating people. That's why we are now meeting them on the unemployment line. You have to organize workers, not the workplace! If you keep that in mind, whatever you do and whatever the short-term gains or losses, you haven't wasted your time.

The labor movement is beginning to look into this concept a little more. In fact, I am beginning to work with the AFL-CIO in Rhode Island to establish a community service immigration center to do voter education, social service work, political

education and labor history among the immigrants. It is important to focus on the immigrants, especially the Hispanic, the Indochinese, and the Portuguese because the labor movement can be the place that these people can go to and get some assistance. Then, when it comes time to organize, support strikes, not be scabs, be good union members, they will have positive experiences with the labor movement even before they became a member. That is essentially what Chavez understood. People with a positive sense of organization, they are the ones who will be the back bone of the union.