

Forward By Fred Ross Jr.

Cesar Chavez – Autobiography of La Causa

By Jacques E. Levy, University Of Minnesota Press, 2007

Cesar Chavez once described his relationship with my father, Fred Ross Sr.: “I learned quite a bit from studying Gandhi, but the first practical steps I learned from the best organizer I know: Fred Ross Sr. . . . He changed my life.” I am a second-generation organizer and learned the craft of organizing from the best teachers I have known, Cesar Chavez and my father. They trained many leaders who continue their powerful legacy. As you will learn from Jacques Levy’s book, it all started in the San Jose barrio of Sal Si Puedes. That fateful first meeting changed the course of history.

I grew up in a household where fighting injustice was a way of life, from my father’s tireless organizing in the barrios and fields of California to my mother Frances Ross’s pioneering work with the mentally ill. In the summer of 1964, I saw the Yaqui Indian and Mexican-American families in Guadalupe, Arizona, seek the most basic kinds of justice: paved streets, traffic lights on a dangerous two-lane highway, and essential services that other communities took for granted.

When I was sixteen I spent the summer in Guadalupe with my father, who had been asked to organize the community. One night, after 897 residents had registered to vote, the newly formed Guadalupe Organization (GO) held its first town meeting. What I saw that night was a classic example of how people organize, build power, and hold elected officials accountable. I saw it in the faces and voices of men and women like Lauro and Margie García, who had never spoken publicly before, I witnessed the influence of organizing and its ability to empower

people. They rose from their seats and fired tough questions at the candidates. That experience made me immensely proud of my father, for I saw how an organizer can change lives and give people the tools to build power and win justice.

When Jacqueline Levy asked me to write a foreword for this paperback edition of Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa, written by her father, I was honored to have the opportunity to pay tribute to Jacques's extraordinary stories of struggle, sacrifice, and hope in La Causa. I greatly admired Jacques's lifelong commitment to social and economic justice and enjoyed working with him in the 1980s and 1990s for peace and justice in Central America.

I do not claim to speak for the thousands of fellow organizers about the legacy of the farm worker movement. I do want to highlight some key lessons that I learned from my father and Cesar Chavez and to illustrate how I have applied and continue to apply them in my life.

Chavez: A Great Teacher

I was privileged to work with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers from 1970 to 1976, and I observed how Cesar inspired those around him to take on the seemingly impossible. During the summer of 1971, the farm workers union conducted a national lettuce boycott because the lettuce industry had signed "sweetheart" deals with the teamsters. The National Farm Bureau had developed a new state-by-state strategy to take away our two most powerful organizing tools: the strike and the boycott. That August, the Oregon legislature passed a law that banned both, leaving us only seven days to mount a pressure campaign on Republican Governor Tom McCall to veto the bill. Everyone in Oregon said it was impossible, but Cesar urged us to take Goliath head on. And we did!

Cesar's courage and fearlessness were infectious. He asked me to lead the organizing campaign in the fields. He sent his lawyer Jerry Cohen to meet with the governor and to raise as much hell as needed. Jerry declared "war" on the state of Oregon while Cesar called for a nationwide boycott of all Oregon products. Farm workers, clergy, and Portland boycott supporters set up a twenty-four-hour-a-day religious vigil on the capitol steps in Salem. Strawberry workers staged spontaneous walkouts and won wage increases. Five thousand farm workers came to a rally with Cesar at the state capitol. Later, one farm worker told me how surprised he was when he first saw Cesar. Because Cesar inspired fear in the growers, the worker imagined him as a giant of a man, dressed in a suit and tie. "But he looked just like me, dressed very simply, and had such small hands!" Two days later the governor vetoed the bill.

By creating the visible threat of a national boycott of Oregon products, coordinating chaos in the fields, and facilitating thousands of calls and telegrams that flooded the governor's office, we created the political will for Governor McCall to do justice. The legendary anti-war Senator Wayne Morse later told us of a call he received from Governor McCall at the height of our campaign. McCall was seeking advice from Morse to justify a decision to veto. On the seventh day, Governor McCall vetoed the bill. We generated real, measurable pressure, which put us in a position to negotiate from a position of strength and defeat the industry's attempt to wipe out our movement. We learned *not* to negotiate hat in hand and *not* to agree to unacceptable laws.

More generally, we learned that to effectively challenge prevailing economic forces you have to both shine a spotlight on the injustice and counter with your own effective economic and political pressure. We learned that for farm workers to win justice they had to build power. Cesar encouraged us to be creative, risk failure, but above all else, make something happen. His broad

call to action gave us the freedom to organize wide-ranging coalitions of churches, labor, minority communities, students, and political allies. He taught us to tell our stories, which inspired tens of thousands of ordinary people in the cities to take collective action on behalf of farm workers. Our boycotts of grapes, lettuce, and Gallo wine applied strong economic pressure on the formerly invincible growers to negotiate fair and just contracts with the farm workers union.

Lessons from La Causa in the Fight for Peace and Justice in Central America

In the early 1980s, I worked as a public defender in San Francisco, where many of my clients were Salvadoran refugees who told me about their struggles against the U.S.–supported military regimes. I was outraged by the Salvadoran military’s assassination of Archbishop Romero and the four U.S. churchwomen. By 1985, the Reagan administration was funding both Contras in Nicaragua and a brutal death squad regime in El Salvador that had killed 40,000 civilians, many of whom were peasant farm workers. I had a feeling that I needed to do something about it.

My experience in the farm worker movement taught me how to organize forceful coalitions and conduct effective grassroots lobbying and electoral campaigns. I had also been part of the farm worker movement at a time when Richard Nixon was president and Ronald Reagan was governor of California, which taught me that it is possible to successfully organize even in a hostile political climate. Both leaders publicly opposed farm worker boycotts and personally attacked Cesar Chavez, but this helped our cause. Buttons with a jowly Nixon stuffing himself with scab grapes above the caption “Nixon Eats Grapes” were a bestseller.

In 1985, I learned about an education group called Neighbor to Neighbor, which hoped to air the documentary Faces of War, narrated by actor and activist Mike Farrell, on television stations throughout the country. In 1986 I established Neighbor to Neighbor as a national grassroots organization and recruited some of the most talented veteran United Farm Worker organizers. We shared a powerful bond from our common experiences, and held a deep fire for justice in our bellies. Many of the most committed religious supporters of the farm workers, like Father Bill O'Donnell, were now deeply engaged in the movement for peace and justice in El Salvador. My father joined me to help train a new generation of organizers, and Jerry Cohen became special counsel.

When we first campaigned to defeat the policy of Reagan and Oliver North of providing military aid for the Contras in Nicaragua, most people thought it could not be done. From 1986 to 1988 more than one hundred Neighbor to Neighbor organizers were deployed to eleven states and eighteen congressional districts, trying to get the swing votes needed to cut off Contra aid. We mobilized seventy thousand Americans in our national grassroots campaign, combining it with creative media campaigns that reached twenty million people. In 1987, we used my father's house meeting method to help elect Nancy Pelosi to Congress. She made and kept her commitment to be a leader for peace in Central America. In 1988, Congress voted by a 219–211 margin to cut off aid to the Contras, marking the first defeat for the Reagan foreign policy. Our campaign had made the difference.

Relationships Matter: An Old Friend Helps Stop a Coffee Barge and Launch a Boycott

One of the most direct legacies of the UFW experience was the controversial international boycott of Salvadoran and Folgers coffee that Neighbor to Neighbor launched in December 1989, just five days after the Salvadoran military's brutal assassination of six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter.

The Neighbor to Neighbor decision to depart from a successful grassroots mobilizing and media campaign was very controversial. However, those of us from the farm worker movement understood that a well-planned boycott could be a significant vehicle to harness moral, economic, and political pressure toward a negotiated end to the war in El Salvador. The UFW veterans prevailed after a lively and contentious internal debate, which led Jerry Cohen to recall the Yeats poem of "youth restraining reckless middle age."

One of the heroes of the Salvadoran coffee boycott and true warrior for justice was International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) president Jimmy Herman, whom I first met while working as a young farm worker organizer. He was one of the first labor leaders to go to Delano and support the farm workers, and he later encouraged his members to dump scab grapes into San Francisco Bay. One night over dinner, I laid out Neighbor to Neighbor's boycott strategy and asked if Jimmy would support his members' refusal to unload Salvadoran coffee on the San Francisco docks. With a glint in his eye, he expressed his enthusiastic support.

Creative Nonviolent Action: “Moral Jiu-Jitsu”

At most we thought we could stop the coffee for two or three days because of highly restrictive labor laws. In February 1990, ILWU leaders informed us that the Salvadoran ship Ciudad de Buenaventure, loaded with forty-three tons of bloody coffee, was due to dock in San Francisco in forty-eight hours. More than four hundred of our supporters joined us there, and our sign-waving, chanting picket line backed up trucks for more than three-quarters of a mile. Jimmy secured a commitment from the ship owners that the coffee would not be unloaded but would instead be sent to Vancouver, British Columbia. Moments later, Jimmy addressed the crowd and a throng of TV cameras: “That death squad coffee is going to Vancouver, but it’s only going along for the ride. Neighbor to Neighbor will have a picket line there, and our members will honor those lines and will refuse to unload the bloody coffee.”

Huge cheers erupted from the crowd. Jimmy took me aside and whispered, “Can you get a picket line going in seventy-two hours in Vancouver?” “Yes,” I replied, and we did. The coffee barge faced a final rejection at the port of Long Beach before being forced to sail back to El Salvador with the coffee still in its hold. The ILWU effectively sealed off shipments of Salvadoran coffee from the West Coast for the next two years. We learned an important lesson from Cesar about moral jiu-jitsu: “Nonviolence also has one big demand—the need to be creative, to develop strategy. Gandhi described it as moral jiu-jitsu. Always hit the opposition off balance but keep your principles.”

From a \$900 T.V. Ad to \$70 Billion of Corporate Pressure for Peace

“Boycott Folgers Coffee. What it brews is misery and death.” In May 1990, we produced a thirty-second TV ad narrated by actor Ed Asner, which showed an upside-down coffee cup oozing blood and linked Folgers to the right-wing death squads in El Salvador. Only one TV station in the country agreed to let us buy time: the CBS affiliate WHDH in Boston. We scraped together the nine hundred dollars to buy the ad time. Within twenty-four hours of the ad’s airing, Proctor and Gamble, the parent company of Folgers, announced it was canceling one million dollars of advertising from WHDH because it had aired our bloody coffee ad.

Fortunately for us, the media loves to cover itself. Proctor and Gamble’s flagrant retaliation generated millions of dollars of free publicity for the boycott, with television stations and print media competing with each other to cover the story. The day after Proctor and Gamble’s announcement, the New York Times ran a front page article, complete with a photograph of the bloody coffee cup, about Proctor and Gamble’s decision to pull its ads.

We learned from Congress members Nancy Pelosi and George Miller, Neighbor to Neighbor allies, that Salvadoran President Cristiani had met with a congressional delegation and complained bitterly about the Neighbor to Neighbor coffee boycott. We also produced a sticker with skull and crossbones that read: “Boycott Folgers: This coffee helps fund death squads in El Salvador.” The Proctor and Gamble CEO sent a copy of this sticker to the White House, the State Department, and Senator Kennedy, with a letter branding our TV ad as defamatory.

As a result of mounting boycott pressure, by November 1991 Proctor and Gamble had accepted our proposal that it recruit Nestlé and Kraft to take out full-page ads for peace in the

four major Salvadoran newspapers. These three multinational corporations represented seventy billion dollars of annual revenue and about 80 percent of Salvadoran coffee imports to the United States. They were now pressuring the Salvadoran government and Salvadoran coffee industry to negotiate a peace settlement. On January 16, 1992, the FMLN and the ARENA government formally signed a peace agreement.

Forcing Your Opponents to Defend the Indefensible

Representative Howard Berman and Representative Nancy Pelosi set up a meeting for us with Undersecretary of State for Latin America, Bernard Aronson. Aronson had worked for the United Mine Workers and had supported the farm workers. Jerry Cohen and I aimed to force him to defend the indefensible: justify the Bush administration's support for a fascist military regime in El Salvador. We laid out a controversial full-page ad that quoted Roberto D'Abusson, Salvadoran death squad leader and founder of the ruling ARENA party: "Hitler had the right idea." Under the quotation was a gruesome photograph of hundreds of dead peasants stacked like cords of wood in the back of a Salvadoran military truck. The ad helped us strip the mask off the Bush administration's fraudulent protestations of supporting democracy in El Salvador. We had learned from Cesar to be direct, forceful, and confrontational when necessary to speak truth to power.

SEIU: Teaching a New Generation of Organizers a Broader Vision for Social and Economic Justice

My father died in September 1992; Cesar Chavez died suddenly six months later. By the late 1990s I had made a commitment to pass on the lessons of the past to the next generation of organizers.

Eliseo Medina, who had been a Delano grape striker in 1965 and was trained by Cesar and my father, was now a national elected vice-president in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Eliseo and I had reconnected on an immigrant rights campaign in Los Angeles, and our work together sparked my interest in returning to the labor movement. SEIU had an impressive track record: the innovative and vibrant Justice for Janitors Movement, inspired by former UFW organizers, and the breakthrough victory that seventy-four thousand low-wage homecare workers had won in Los Angeles. Just as the UFW utilized consumer boycotts to help win their union, SEIU and its labor allies learned how to effectively organize billions of dollars of worker pension funds to hold entrenched corporate power accountable. Eliseo recruited me to join SEIU as a campaign director. I, in turn, recruited a number of Neighbor to Neighbor veterans to SEIU, several who are leading national efforts today.

Eliseo has emerged as a national leader in the growing immigrant rights movement, patiently building extensive coalitions and increasing the political participation of immigrants from the farm worker tradition. He also directs an ambitious seventeen-state organizing program in the South and Southwest. In June 2006, Eliseo joined striking janitors at the University of Miami in a fast for justice, just as Cesar had done in Delano in 1968. SEIU organized a national campaign focused at Donna Shalala, the president of the University of Miami and former Clinton

Secretary of Health and Human Services. The workers' sacrifice helped call attention to the injustice of their plight: low wages and no health care benefits. The pressure generated by SEIU and its allies across the country achieved victory for these workers.

In 2003, I had the opportunity to organize janitors in San Francisco, many who were from Yemen. As we met I shared the story of a courageous Yemeni grape strike leader named Naji Daifullah, who had been killed by a Kern County sheriff during the bloody strike in 1973. One morning, an older Yemeni janitor walked into the office and asked for me. He reached into his wallet and pulled out his UFW union card from thirty years before when he had been a striker with Daifullah. We later learned that more than twenty-five of our members were 1973 strikers who had left the fields to come to the cities, proudly carrying on the farm worker legacy. These janitors were the new urban farm workers indeed!

On March 31, 2007, on what would have been Cesar Chavez's eightieth birthday, I was fortunate to join forty-five hospital workers who had gathered in house meetings during the previous six weeks, just as my father had first met Cesar. They came together to discuss forming a union at the Saint Joseph Health System, the largest nonunion hospital system in California. I was inspired by how these men and women encouraged one another to act for what they believed in, despite the fears that many expressed. The Saint Joseph Health System workers are continuing the freedom movement in the farm workers tradition. They understand that it will be a struggle to win the respect, voice, and dignity that they deserve. The highlight of this particular meeting was when a woman realized she would have less to fear if she became a public supporter of the union. She suddenly jumped to her feet and, spreading her arms wide, shouted "I get it: Norma Rae!" evoking the classic film story of workers standing up for their rights. These are the moments that continue to inspire me and make organizing so rewarding.

SEIU has provided me the opportunity to train this new generation of organizers, some of whom have been the sons and daughters of former UFW organizers. It has been a special joy to see them continue the legacy, as they now operate on the frontlines in Texas, Florida, and Orange County, California. I feel privileged to have trained several of the young organizers who are leading this groundbreaking work at the Saint Joseph Health System in the conservative Orange County.

I learned from Cesar Chavez and my father that the organizer works quietly behind the scenes, patiently asking questions, listening respectfully, agitating, teaching new leaders, pushing them to take action, and creating hope con ánimo, with great enthusiasm. The organizer finds people one at a time, teaches them to develop their own powerful voices, turns their anger about injustice into hope by encouraging them to take action, raises hell, stirs up trouble, and has fun doing it.

Jacques Levy's account of the epic battles in the fields of California is an inspiring story of the farm workers movement, and demonstrates how time after time these men and women defied the odds to win justice, dignity, and equality. The lessons in this story, illustrating the power of nonviolent action and the art of moral jiu-jitsu, are meant to be practiced. Those who were part of the farm workers movement have passed down their trade to thousands of organizers now working in human rights, environmental justice, labor, and electoral politics. The efforts of these young organizers, for me, are the farm workers' most enduring legacy.