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Cesar Chavez Talks About Organizing And The History Of The NFWA

Cesar Chavez, Director of the National Farm Worker's Association (NFWA), spoke at a session of the California SNCC state-wide meeting in Fresno last month. Here are some excerpts from the tape made of his talk and his answers to questions.

I have been asked to discuss some of my thoughts on community organizing. Labor organizing, as I know it, has a lot of community organizing in it. When you read of labor organizing in this country you can say there is a point where labor "is organized." But in community organizing there never is a point where you can say "it is organized."

In community organizing you need continuous program that meets the needs of the people in the organization. I have seen many groups attempt community organization and many have failed. The biggest reason for this is that there is a big emphasis on meetings and discussion and writing up programs and not on working with the people. Many organizers get lost in the shuffle of going to meetings, and somehow those who are being organized are lost. Too often we see as remedy to this, people suggesting that you should have a survey or a study made.

Any one who has done any community organizing would agree with me that you can't have a program until you have the people organized. I don't mean you have to wait until you're fully organized, but how can you write a program without the participation of those you are trying to organize?

Community organization is very difficult. You can't put it in the freezer for a couple of years and then thaw it out and you're in business again. Or even a month. Community Organization can disintegrate right from under you. This is why we see so many other kinds of groups – church and labor – and so few community organizations formed.

There are a lot of different ideas of what community organization is. When I think of a community, I think not of Fresno, but of Negroes or Mexican-Americans, or poor workers.

Building Power

Any one who thinks they can organize a community and then join with the power structure is in for an awful surprise. And a disappointment because things don't happen that way. When you speak of community organization you are also speaking, really, of power. If you haven't the power to do things you're not going to do anything. Some organizers I know say, "All I need is a good public relations man." This is a lot of

nonsense. The only PR the opposition knows is power, and having the power to strike him where it hurts him, political and economic. You're building power based not on the prestige of your group, but on how many actual bodies you have with you and how many bodies can be united and directed.

In many cases community organizations have been started just because there was money available to have them started. This is another real problem in getting something permanent.

Money

I was in CSO (Community Services Organization) for many years. In some ways we were successful, but in one of the most important aspects we were a complete failure, and this was in getting the group to generate its own finances so it becomes permanent. I remember many times stopping organizing so we could go organize another part of the community to raise money. In most cases when you get money, though this varies in degree, you have some strings attached. We get a lot of money for CSO and we made very clear to the donors that there could be no strings attached.

But there's always one string attached – that is when people give money, they expect miracles. Then your staff or Executive Board starts compromising between a well-thought out long-range program and something that will show immediate progress.

What Is An Organizer?

Then there's another problem. People say, "I'm just an organizer." An organizer is an outsider in many cases – there's nothing wrong in that. But then he assumes a sort of special position in that program. What he's saying is he's something special, not an integral part of that group. I think that's a mistake. If you organize a good group, pretty soon you find yourself hoping. "I wish I had a vote in this outfit."

If you're going to do community organizing, you'll find out in the course of doing your job, some of the good people and some of the bad people invariably get hurt.

Another problem is respectability. If a minority group does "nice" things, like taking a petition to the Mayor, or having tea parties with the PTA, it's going to become respectable. And once you become a respectable group, you're not going to fight anymore. I've had a lot of experience in that. So if your group is going to City Hall or the Police Department and fight with the Police Chief, and someone on your Executive Board is friends with him, you're going to think twice before attacking him.

If an organizer comes looking for appreciation he might as well stay home. He's not going to get any, especially out of a group that's never been organized or had any power before.

In the Association, to get 100 members, we had a heck of a time. When we were over that, some joined on the strength of the others who joined. It wasn't because an organizer or an officer told him to join, but because another worker was right beside him in the fields telling him about it. So, if you get a small group, they become the organizers. The only way I know is to spend an awful lot of time with each individual – hours and hours – until he understands and you've got him going.

How NFWA Began

It was a major decision for me to leave Los Angeles and CSO. CSO was the only organization I had ever known; it was my whole world. So it was difficult to quit and go out on my own. To go a little further back:

I was working in the fields when CSO came to San Jose. I was in the orchards, apricots and peaches. I talked to their organizer, Fred Ross, and the first thing I asked him was “How is CSO going to help the farm worker?” And he told me – If we get strong enough, we're gong to build a union. And I said, “That's for me.” And of course I had a lot of hatred for the cops and that was one of the main issues of CSO in LA.

So it was just perfect for me: I was learning a lot of things. But after a while, it was growing too fast, and it was making a name for itself, and it was attracting a lot of people who were not farm workers, but who were semi-professional and professional Mexican-Americans. It developed a verbal commitment to farm workers, but no action, just legislation.

Best Motel In Town

There were other problems. It was unheard of that CSO would meet in a room like this (a meeting room in a low-rent housing project). It had to meet in the best motel in town, very expensive, and it cut off all the farm workers who couldn't afford to be there. The reason given was – we have to build prestige. The politicians have to know who we are; we can't take them to a dump. We have to take them to the best place in town and then we can relate to them about farm workers. I was naïve about farm workers; I was naïve enough in the beginning to buy that.

So we ended up just with farm workers who had gone to school or who weren't farm workers anymore. They thought that going to school gave them the right to be leaders — which incidentally isn't the case; I'll debate that with anyone.

Out Of Touch

Pretty soon we developed conflict between the people with problems in the cities, whether to help them or the farm workers. Then somehow we got messed up with programs that meant little or nothing to the worker. For example — legislation. Too

remote. The farm worker isn't trained to understand the processes of government, so having a big fight for unemployment insurance or a minimum wage law — they didn't understand it — they had no idea how laws are made.

We'd constantly get situations where we'd explain about legislation and a guy would get up in the back and say, "I've been a farm worker all my life. This is a lot of nonsense. Let's go directly to the President." Or — "The Governor should issue a statement saying we should get paid more." And we'd have to explain that the Governor couldn't do that; and we lost him.

Or, when the officers of CSO were semi-professional or professional...it became a problem of communication with the workers. In most cases the leadership had more to lose than the workers, they'd say, "We should fight, but we should be moderate."

Split

We couldn't get them to organize a union — they felt that farm workers were outside the jurisdiction of CSO — it was a "labor" problem. Some of us in the movement felt the only way to get it was to force the issue and if we lost move out and create a group that would serve only farm workers. We felt if we had nothing but farm workers in their own group a lot of ills we had known in CSO would not be present.

So in April, 1962 I moved out of LA and came down to Delano. A lot of people have asked me — why Delano, and the answer is simple. I had no money. My wife's family lived there, and I have a brother. And I thought if things go very bad we can always go and have a meal there. Any place in the Valley would have made no difference.

I had some ideas on what should be done. No great plans; just that it would take an awful lot of work and also that it was a gamble. If I can't organize them to a point where they can carry on their own group then I'm finished. I can't do it, I'd move on and do something else.

I went to about 87 communities and labor camps and in each place I'd find a few people who were committed to doing something; something had happened in their lives and they were ready for it. So we went around to the towns, played the percentages, and came off with a group.

First Meeting

We had a convention here in Fresno, the first membership meeting, to set up a union — about 230 people from as many as 65 places. We knew the hardest thing would be to put across a program that would make them want to pay the \$3.50 (monthly dues), because we were dependent on that, I felt that organization couldn't be done on outside money.

We had signed up about 1100 people. The first month 211 paid. At the end of three months we had 10 people paying. Talk about being scared! But we went back and kept at it. By this time Dolores (Huerta) was helping me up in the Northern part of the Valley, and I was getting help from Gilbert Padilla, both of whom are Vice Presidents now. Gradually the membership was increasing.

At the end of six months we were up to about 200 members. Instead of going all over the Valley as I did at first, I started staying in one place long enough for them to get in touch with me if they wanted to. We put a lot of emphasis on the people getting members.

House Meetings

We had hundreds of house meetings. Sometimes 2 or 3 would come, sometimes none. Sometimes even the family that called the house meeting would not be there.

I wasn't trying to prove anything to anyone who had given money. If I'd been under a board or a grant I don't think it would have worked. In the first place, I had to get the dues in order to eat. I suspect some of the members were paying dues because they felt sorry for me.

A guy who's paid dues for a year or three years has a stake in the Association. In CSO if I was making a report, and there were five people in the room and I mentioned four of the, the fifth would take off; very sensitive. We never got any arguments, any debate in CSO. Here there's a lot of questions about how the money is spent. It should be this way.

At the beginning of the strike we had \$85 in the treasure. We had the problem of people going out on strike and having no way to support them. So we had a big drive to get workers to go outside the area to work so they wouldn't be strike-breakers.

Role Of Organizer

The organizer has to work more than anyone else in that group. Almost no one in a group is totally committed. And in the initial part of the movement there's the fear that when the organizer leaves, the movement will collapse. So you have to be able to say, I'm not going to be here a year, or 6 months, but an awful long time — until when they get rid of me they'll have leaders to do it themselves.

Question: Are you dealing with the problem of leadership by becoming the leadership — does that inhibit the development of leadership in NFWA?

We're young, and we'd say no, but we're not kidding ourselves. The best we can do is build barriers to guard against that. But we can't say to — say one of our Vice

Presidents — “You’ve performed a function; you’ve developed as a leader — now we have to get rid of you because we’ve got to develop somebody else.”

When you’re doing nothing but organizing you can move the group and you can do an awful lot of things. If you don’t have a paid staff, and that staff isn’t in any one place long enough to make the thing strong, you’re not going to get anywhere.

(The strike) is not a normal function of the Association. We need some time to do community organizing. We will have to go back into the community and do a lot of work we should have done before the strike. We’ll take the time before the pruning season to do some organizing and strengthen the organization.

In order to develop leadership from the group, you’ve got to have something going. My experience may be different from SNCC, but from all I’ve seen, whenever an organizer leaves, that’s pretty much the end of that group. So what do you have? You leave because you don’t want to hold back the leadership developing — but how do you get the leadership without anything going? On that I’ve given an awful lot of thought.

When we get to the point where we’re negotiating, my hopes are to have a joint board where both groups would equally be represented and would be in a position to negotiate with the growers. The best thing for the growers would be to organize themselves and bargain with us collectively. But if they want to bargain individually, we’ll do that too. I’d rather lose the strike than bargain with the growers separately from AWOC. In fact, I won’t ever talk to them unless someone from AWOC is present.

Since AWOC is affiliated with the AFL-CIO we don’t go directly to them for support. We depend on the clergy, the students and civic groups. We have an informal agreement that they’ll stick to labor donations and we’ll go to the groups I mentioned.

We go beyond what we see as the limitations of a labor union and try to get benefits for our members before a contract. We have a combination between a labor union and a community service group. So we help the members with their individual problems and we have the Credit Union and the newspaper (El Marlcriado) and a cooperation store we were starting before the strike came. And we have a small burial insurance program for them.

Hopefully we’ll be able to strengthen the cooperative program — go further and have a garage cooperation. We want to organize a mutual insurance set up that will handle a health program for the workers.

Minimum Wage

A minimum wage? Of course that would be good. But even with a minimum wage we’ll still have to strike to get a just wage.