

A compilation of statements and observations made by Cesar Chavez regarding his work. Edited by David Leonard Cohen of the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations. 1969

La Causa And La Huelga: A Community Union is Organized

The strike and the boycott, they have cost us much. What they have not paid us in wages, better working conditions, and new contracts, they have paid us in self respect and human dignity.

Violence

If we had used violence we would have won contracts a long time ago but they wouldn't have been lasting because we wouldn't have won respect. Wages are not the main issue in the strike. If wages were the issue our organization would disappear after recognition and an increase in pay. No, what is at stake is human dignity. If a man is not accorded respect, he cannot respect himself and if he does not respect himself, he cannot demand it.

When workers fall back on violence, they are lost. Oh they might win some of their demands and might end a strike a little earlier, but they give up their imagination, their creativity, their will to work hard enough and to suffer for what they believe is right.

Behaving violently is giving up the will to win. Some people just want to get knocked on the head, to be self-pitying. Violence just hurts those who are already hurt. Violence in the civil rights movement just makes black people suffer. Black homes are burned and black sons are killed. Instead of exposing the brutality of the oppressors it justifies it.

There are many reasons for why a man does what he does. To be himself he must be able to give all. If a leader cannot give all he cannot expect his people to give anything. The violence upsets me. When I went on my fast, I told no one. I worked everyday as usual. But I could not keep it a secret long. Finally I knew I had to tell some that I would be going to our headquarters at Forty Acres. But I told only a few friends. It was a test, a dedication. It was not a hunger strike. I did not want publicity. I did not want the press to pick it up and to distort it. It was a personal thing. But the word did get out, and it was the best organizing I ever did. People came to me in lines for days. It was for all of us a religious experience. The fast gave lie to the grower's claim that we had no following. Some people came very night to attend Mass, eighty-five miles. We estimated ten thousand came during my fast. Everyone came, Mexicans, Filipinos, blacks—Robert Kennedy sent me a telegram. Then he came. Others came. They understood.

Friends swore to me they would never be violent again. Filipino women came and

1 This is a compilation of statements and observations on his own work by Cesar Chavez, director of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. They come from a variety of sources: personal interviews, newspaper and magazine articles, statements reported on

T.V., and an earlier compilation from tapes made by Mr. Chavez in May 1967, while in Detroit. The tapes were edited by David Leonard Cohen in January 1969, when associated with the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations.

decorated the building at the Forty Acres, where I maintained my fast. It was beautiful art by people who are not artists. The fast brought the creativity out of people.

Mexican Catholics can be very discriminatory towards Mexican Protestants. But something beautiful happened during the fast. On the fifth day a Protestant preacher from Earlimart came. I asked him to preach to our Mass. At first he didn't believe it could be done. But I told him it was about time to repair some of the damage that had been done among our people. So he preached and there was a great spirit. A few days later I invited another Protestant to preach and then a Negro minister, and then the minister from Earlimart again. This time he brought his congregation to sing Protestant Mexican hymns. It was a beautiful thing. It has done much for our people.

When I finished my fast at the Mass of Thanksgiving, I was too weak to speak, but a friend explained for me what the purpose of the fast was. I have the paper in which some of my words were written and read.

“When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only in giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us be men.”

On Being Able to Carry Your Own Weight

I started out working under Fred Ross, the organizer for the Community Service Organization, set up by Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation. I was his constant companion. I used to get home about 5:30 from work and Fred would pick me up. And we would go from meeting to meeting. I observed how he did things and I learned from him. I had a need to learn. After a while I became a chairman of our local CSO group, then I became an organizer and staff person. Soon I was organizing in the whole state.

When I left CSO in April of 1962 I almost cried like a baby. CSO was the first organization to try to help Mexican Americans. I wanted CSO to organize farm workers. I thought the only way to really help Mexican Americans was on the farm fields. I offered to work for them for a year without pay. The organization did not agree, so I resigned. A week later I came to Delano. I turned down a union offer to organize for them. I didn't want outside support. If we were to have an organization, the members would have to support it. Outside offers of support were turned down, for we knew that if we became dependent early, we might not have the courage we needed later. Having studied the mistakes of CSO and other organizations, I did not want to repeat them. We wanted the workers to prove to us, and we wanted to prove to ourselves, that they really wanted what we were doing. The assurance came from monthly contributions of \$3.50 in dues. It is true that some members came to meetings because they had an investment. If they had been active in the union for a year, they had \$42 invested. They were there to see how their

money was being spent and for no other reason. But as they came to meetings, we were trying to educate them, building the brotherhood and solidarity so necessary for the understanding needed to bring about a strong organization.

During the first winter of the organizing I would go out to their homes and call on them to pay their dues if they were one or two months behind. I recall one particular incident that will remain with me for many, many years to come. I went to a home in McFarland, California, seven miles south of Delano. It was the evening of a very cold and rainy day. Because of the weather, there had been no work that day in the fields. I went to this home and knocked on the door. The union member was just getting ready to leave.

I told him that he was two months behind in his dues and that we would have to cancel his membership. He had \$5.00 in his hand and he gave it to me. As I gave him back \$1.50 in change, he told me that he was just on his way out to the store to buy food. I held the money in my hand for a few seconds trying to decide whether to take the money. If I refunded it, I would have to forget the idea of workers paying their own way while they were building a union. It was difficult. The man hadn't been working and had very little money. I took the money, and for the next week I felt very bad about it.

But something happened about three years later. The same man continued to pay his dues and became one of our best strikers. He also became one of the first workers to benefit from the Schenley contract when it was signed. Of course, there were still a lot of people who remained in between. Whenever a member would come to us for assistance, the first thing that we asked about and the thing we insisted upon was that his dues be paid up. They paid the dues and the services were theirs. Now in our Association the worker pays his union dues and in that way pays for his services. We tell then, "We want you to come and demand service, but first of all you have to pay your dues."

This is where we differ from other organizations, and from the poverty program. Helping people by providing services is not enough. Often people get some service and they ask you: "How much do I owe?" In the hand-out programs they say: "Nothing, it is your right, this is paid by the government."

We say: "Sure you owe something. You owe your participation and your responsibility to help other poor people." But that is not enough. Then you have to be completely ready to tell them exactly what they can do to help. You have to have an activity, a task, a job. And while they are doing it, you give them encouragement and you build them into real members. If a person asks what he can do to help it is because he does not know. You must tell him in clear language he can understand.

People do not know what to do. Do not romanticize the poor. The Mexican and the Negro are not some sort of noble innocent. We are all people, human beings subject to the same temptations and faults as all others. Our poverty damages our dignity.

Being disadvantaged is not romantic. It is tragic. We want to see our wives and to be seen as human beings. We know the truth, even if some of the college people who come to help think we are the innocent and the growers are the devils. This is a very hard-nosed operation. Members who pay their dues get service; those who don't pay don't get any service.

Why Delano?

When I left CSO I knew it was to organize farm workers. I chose Delano as my target area for two reasons. First, my wife's family and my brother lived there. I knew there would be hard times ahead, and at least my eight children would not starve.

The second reason has to do with the composition of the work force in Delano. There are over 70 grape vineyards. Table grapes require tender handling. Laborers have to have some skill in leafing, spraying, binding, pruning. Workers here were the best paid in the industry and the most stable. The season lasts nine months. If you are going to organize and ask for commitment, you cannot go to the most desperately poor. They are not likely to take action. If you stand on a man's head and push it into the dirt, he may not even see the heel of your boot. But if his whole face is already above ground, he can see your heel and he can see freedom ahead.

Getting Started

People ask why we were so successful when other attempts to organize a union failed and when all other strike attempts killed union organizing. The reason is that we did not begin to organize a union. I never talked about a union and I never used the word strike. Instead of staying in one community and trying to organize workers against a background of repeated failures over the past forty years, I decided to visit as many communities as I could in the San Joaquin Valley.

I was counting on my past experience that no matter where you go, you will always find a few people who are ready to take up any cause you may have. This is not always so good. People join the wrong causes and some people join your cause for reasons that are not healthy. But what in poverty is healthy?

My family and I visited something like seventy-eight communities including small rural villages and large labor camps. I didn't go to people and say, "Look you're poor and I'm poor. Let's get together and take on the power structure." They would have looked at me as if I were crazy.

We distributed cards throughout the entire valley. Eight thousand of them were signed and returned. We walked through the fields, and door to door. We didn't ask all kinds of fancy questions. Just one, "How much do you think you deserve to earn for an hour's work?" At that time the average pay was 90¢ per hour. Almost everybody responded that they thought they should be getting a \$1.00 or \$1.10. Only a handful said \$1.25, \$1.50 or \$2.00. I was dejected by their low aspirations and feeling of worth.

But some of the people wrote us notes of encouragement. We went and talked to each of these. We said, "If you and I get together, we can solve our problems. We have to help each other." And we tried to demonstrate what we meant. If a man was hurt, I would stay with him until I was sure we could get him medical services. If a man needed legal help, I might stay with him or travel to find it for four and five days. When I went out to visit those who had written the comments, with me I took things that I thought would be important for them to know—Social Security stuff and other useful material. On each piece was stamped the name and address of the Association in Delano. When they saw the name, they wondered about it and what was happening.

At first there weren't too many people to respond, but soon the word got around. Day and night people started coming to our house. We were building up a basic trust. We never talked about building a union, just an association of concerned people. But there were some, about twenty people, who went out and really did a job. They went out and took the time to sign people up. Thus our organization was created out of activity. When you go to talk you go to talk to everybody. The only place that I don't talk to people is at bars. I will talk to them at grocery stores, on the street, or anywhere I can. Your best means of contact in the community where you are organizing is simply to stop people on the street. The first reaction that you are likely to get when you stop someone to talk about organizing is that the person may think you are crazy. But because there is in most cases a natural reaction to pay attention to what you have to say, he listens.

The most important thing about signing up a member was that you made a friend. You visited a place, and they would later write to you. Then we would write back to them. If I would be in their neighborhood I would try to stop in to visit. I visited them in their homes and ate with them. This I had to do because I didn't have any money. If you really want to make a friend, go to someone's home and eat with him. When you get to know people, their home's open to you. They gave me food and a place to sleep. Some gave me money for gas. They had begun to feel sorry for me because I was poorer than they were. Once we had become friends, they would tell me what they wanted. The people who give you their food give you their heart.

We were able to get about four hundred workers who became the nucleus of our association. The secret was that these people were already organized and that it was just a matter of getting them all together. You can't organize people unless there is a need. Poor people have a need. If organizers are unsuccessful, it is because they have not learned the lessons of organizing well. Organizers must blame only themselves if people don't respond. I have often heard organizers saying things like, "Well, they don't really appreciate the things that we are trying to do." "Their level of intelligence is so low that they can't comprehend what we're doing for them." Or, "They just haven't any interest in themselves." What they fail to say is "We're just not getting the message across to them." People have a very nice subtle way of telling us that they don't like our program.

There is no substitute for hard work, 23 or 24 hours a day. And there is no substitute for patience and acceptance.

We called our first convention together in Fresno, in September 1962. About 350 people were there. At that time the union was called the National Farm Workers Association. There we adopted a very ambitious program. We wanted to gradually move from a community setting in which brotherhood was created through individual help and attention to personal problems to the solidarity needed for a union that would be ready to strike successfully.

Membership Services

We also developed what is now called the Farm Workers Service Center. This Center is not like a welfare agency.

At first we pooled our resources to get legal help in individual cases. Say for instance that a man was rooked by a salesman with a high interest contract. We put all our pennies together and hired a lawyer. If the contract was for, let's say, \$100, the company back in Chicago or Detroit would say, "Gee, you know attorneys would cost at least \$100 anyway." So they would drop the case. If one of the workers got a traffic ticket and came to us and said, "Look, I really didn't deserve this ticket," and if we were convinced that he was right, we would spend perhaps \$100 on a \$5.00 ticket—in some cases even more.

Any time that we felt that an injustice was involved in a problem, we would work on that problem in two ways: First, we would let everyone know about it, especially the membership. Second, we would make sure the person involved had a commitment to follow through.

Soon we set up a credit union and co-op programs to help get such things as insurance and automobile parts. I learned bookkeeping from a government pamphlet. The most important possession for the farm worker is an automobile. A lot of money was being poured into repairing their old cars. So we developed what we call the car service center.

Our car co-op is a little different from the standard accepted co-op program operating in this country today. Instead of making the savings refund at the end of the year, we give a refund right across the counter when the worker purchases the item. In the car co-op we have always concentrated on little items, parts that are needed for a car—not luxury items such as fancy hub caps, but items such as generators, starters and the like.

Now we also have a gasoline co-op, and we are able to sell gasoline three or four cents a gallon cheaper than any station in town. We also organized a newspaper so that we could keep people informed about the things that were going on within the Association.

A Community Union

As word spread, more people heard about what we were trying to do and joined us, thus increasing our resources.

When the other unions were organizing workers, they seemed to approach the problem by using only the issues workers had with their employers. They were not doing anything on the community part of the problem. We wanted to do both things. We wanted to have a community union. We didn't have the name for it at that time, but we knew that we wanted to deal with community problems by getting the people together and showing them that there is some power in numbers.

After winning some victories we began to pull things together, started some programs, and gradually moved into a union setting where we would be really ready to strike and confront employers.

In the four and a half years before the strike we had a lot of time to do this. Only once did the press find out what we were doing. Only once did it get through. Otherwise, for four and half years no one knew what we were doing except for our most immediate friends.

We had many tests and some early victories. Even before I left CSO we demonstrated. Braceros were getting jobs before residents worked even though the law stated clearly that residents should get first preference. I would take groups of unemployed workers and have

them fill out an employer's work card. We did this day after day, keeping records of the results. We then had a protest march and a card burning ceremony to symbolize our protest and to show the worker's contempt for such hiring practices.

Later, when we discovered that Kern and Tulare counties were actually making money on the filthy, slummy migrant camps, we were able to encourage the migrants who lived there to demand that they be closed down and new ones erected. I felt we were getting close to being ready to strike. Our situation was different from that where the other strikes failed.

In many of the early strikes, the organizers who actually were conducting the strikes blamed the people for their failures. In almost all cases, the people blamed the unions and the organizers for the failure. The unions came in with a paid staff and quite a bit of money, but after having spent a considerable amount of money, they all gave up the idea of organizing. There was in all the attempts one most noticeable parallel. The unions were attempting to do two jobs in one: They were attempting to organize the workers and simultaneously to strike.

Most of the unions were going into the fields to organize workers after the workers had revolted. The workers were out on strike (one on of those suicide strikes) and the unions couldn't put things together to hold with any permanence.

In the end the people felt that the unions had sold them out, and the union leaders felt that the people really didn't want a union. With this past history we had a number of failures to contend with and we wanted to change that.

When we came in, we decided that the job was too big to do all at one time. If we were going to organize a union, it would have to be done quietly, incorporating the idea that is now known as a community union.

First of all, we wanted to convince ourselves that the workers really wanted a union this time. They had to show us that they wanted a union. They did this by their paying for the initial organizing drive.

By building a strong base we felt that someday we would be ready to strike, conduct a boycott, and exert other legal, economic means needed to get our union recognized.

The Strike Begins

In September of 1965, a few days after the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (an AFL-CIO union led by two Filipino organizers) struck two of the largest growers in the area, we voted to strike the rest of the industry where we had membership. We called our meeting on September 16, Mexico's Independence Day. We brought in 2700 workers for the night of the vote. There wasn't one "NO" vote. Our members said they too wanted independence—from poverty, brutal working conditions, discrimination. I asked our members not to strike until four days later which would give us enough time to make contact with all the growers, asking them to meet with us to negotiate the issues without a strike. Our demands were identical to those of the AWOC. We sent "return receipt requested" letters to all the growers. We called all the growers. We sent them wires and asked the State conciliation Service to call them to see if we could get together. They did not answer our letters. They even refused to accept our wires.

We knew that in the many attempts to organize workers, violence had played a large part in the suppression of the unions and we knew that from the moment we struck justice would be about 20 percent for us and 80 percent for the opposition. I asked the workers to vote that this strike be a nonviolent one. Many of them didn't really know what this meant. But many did know that there was another group in the country that had been making progress for human rights with a commitment to nonviolence, the civil rights movement. It was decided that night that we would be nonviolent and we have kept to this pledge throughout our struggle, but not without difficulty.

On September 16, 1965, at 5:30 a.m., our strike started. During the first ten days almost all the workers left the fields. Nothing was done in the fields. Most of the outside strikebreakers stayed away—not because they believed in the strike but because they feared violence.

The moment they found out that we weren't going to do anything to them, they went to work. Many of those who went into the fields, when asked about it said, "we're with you 100 percent, but we just want to work to get enough money to leave the area. But we are with you." In the first three days wages went up from \$1.15 to \$1.25 because of the shortage.

We began to send strikers to stand by the fields with picket signs. "Huelga," we shouted. We tried to convince the strikebreakers that they were wrong, that they should be with us. If one man walks off the field during a work day, than an official strike is certified. It is important to get someone to walk off.

The picket line is the best place to train organizers. One day on the picket line and a man is never again the same. The picket line is where a man makes his commitment. The longer on the picket line the stronger the commitment. A lot of workers think they make their commitment by walking off the job when nobody sees them. But you get a guy to walk off the field when his boss is watching and, in front of the other guys, throw down his tools and march right to the picket line, that is the guy who makes our strike. The picket line is a beautiful thing because it makes a man more human.

Some of my best organizers and more faithful members hated the union before they joined. But when they see the light, they never desert us because they have been on both sides. The converted ones are our best members. Nonviolence has made it possible to survive, although there have been injustices and injuries. Union members always get arrested. Growers never do.

The strike brought us many surprises. We thought we were striking the growers. We thought the church groups, the city council, and the school people would at least remain neutral, if they would not come to help us. Within 24 hours the Delano City council had held a special meeting and passed a resolution condemning our "communist ties." Both the high school and the elementary school boards passed similar resolutions. The Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution that was similar except that it was more wordy. The Ministerial Association for the very first time in the history of Delano consented to meet with the three local priests, and they too passed a resolution condemning the strike. This really shook us up. We were looking to them as the arbitrators and conciliators. There was, then, only ourselves on the west side of town, trying to meet all forces.

“Huelga”

For the first nine days of the strike the sheriff's office and the police department in Delano played it cool. The very first day of the strike the Kern County Sheriff assigned a squad of deputies to Delano. The sergeant in charge, whose name was Dodd, told us he was here to look after and protect the farm workers on strike. I thought it was a welcome sign and I thanked him.

Nine days later, I was called to an emergency meeting with Sergeant Dodd at the Special Sheriff's Station in Delano. I was told that there was a lot of feeling in the community about the strike. Those poor workers who had crossed the picket lines had become so incensed and disturbed by our attempts to recruit them that there was bound to be violence. He asked us to refrain from speaking to them or even shouting “Huelga.” He told that if we complied, this would further our relationship, thus helping both groups. We had an emergency meeting of the strikers that evening, and I put the problem to them. They put up quite a lot of argument, but I asked them to please do it for this time to prove that we were fair and wanted to keep our friends.

We voted to refrain from shouting “Huelga” at the strikebreakers.

Three days later I was called to another emergency meeting with the sheriff. This time he was complaining because we were still using the word “Huelga.” We were not shouting it; we were just saying it in a normal tone of voice so that the strikebreakers would hear us. When I asked why was there such opposition to the word, he replied, “Well, because all the people know that there is a strike. There's no need to tell them. After all, you are in the United States and you should be speaking English.”

He also said that there were a lot of complaints from the powerful people in the county that the only reason we were using the word “Huelga” was that we were trying to attract the attention of the Communist Party in Latin America. When I protested he said, “Well, the word sounds downright nasty.”

I brought the membership back to another meeting and I told them what had happened. I said, “We cannot use the word ‘Huelga.’ Could we use a different word?” They all out up and told me where to go.

The next morning 44 of the strikers and non-strikers picketed one of the larger growers in the area. Included in this group were my wife, 9 ministers, 11 other wives, and 23 strikers. They lined up about 50 feet from one another and started shouting “Huelga” at the workers at the top of their voices.

Sure enough, as the sheriff had promised, all of them were arrested. I went down to Berkeley to the University to beg money from the students to bail the pickets out of jail. I got t here just before lunchtime, and I spoke from the steps of Sproul Hall. I asked the students to give me their lunch money; and they gave me \$6600, which was enough to bail the pickets out and cover the cost of legal aid to fight the case.

About a year later all 44 cases were dismissed.

Peregrination: Pilgrimage, Penitence, Revolution

We gave Delano a new word. While the word was very dirty in the beginning, now it has become a very accepted word. "Huelga" is used by the high school kids as a means of saying, "Hello, How are you?" It is our symbol.

A symbol is an important thing. That is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride. My brother squared off the wings so that it is easier for members to draw. When people see it they know it means "boycott" and we know it means dignity.

A year after the march from Selma, we decided to have our own penitential march ending on the Capitol steps in Sacramento. The American press can make little things into big things and big things into little things. A lot depends on how well they understand them. We tried desperately to put it into the right perspective so that they would understand. Father Keith Kenney from Sacramento wrote a beautiful explanation about the march, but it was not understood.

The first reason for the march was that we felt that personally we had to do penance for those things that we had done wrong during the six or seven months of striking prior to the march. We wanted to discipline ourselves to keep our commitment of nonviolence. When soldiers are drafted into the army the first thing they do is march. They march back and forth all day long. This is discipline training. They don't say that only 99 percent of the people march. They say everybody marches.

We wanted to come back after marching for 26 days and part of the nights with new dedication. On the march we went through much suffering. This helped us find ourselves, understand ourselves, and discipline ourselves for a strike that we knew was going to take a long, long time. The theme of the march was "pilgrimage, penitence, and revolution." People understood a little about pilgrimage, very little about penitence, and hardly anything about revolution. We were talking about changing things to make a better life. We came back with new dedication and more commitment. We had religious services two or three times a day during the march; and, while we were marching side by side along the road, we were reexamining ourselves. Some of our members, some of our organizers, and some of our friends did not like the religious nature of our march. They felt La Causa should not be a religious affair. But self-dedication is a spiritual experience.

I am not a doctrinaire religiously. I want to break down the barriers. In my fast, I encouraged much different religious activity. I wore a mezuzah around my neck. Jesus must have worn one. Certainly he did not wear a cross.

The march was very successful. Many of the farm workers to whom we went understood the strike a lot better. After we left them they were really a part of the movement. By the time we arrived in Sacramento on Easter Sunday, one grower was ready to sign. Others were ready to give us support.

It takes a lot of punishment to be able to do anything to change the social order. It is such a difficult thing to do, especially when the matter of money is involved as it is in our case. It was only after we went on strike that we began to accept money from others. Walter Reuther pledged \$5000 a month for the duration of the strike as support from the UAW. The AFL-CIO offered \$10,000 per month. Other money began to come later.

The Boycott

We have won our major contracts mainly through economic pressure on the growers. As farm workers, we are specifically excluded from the protection of the National Labor Relations Act. Under the present situation we can't go to the employer and say, "We have 30 percent, or 50 percent or 100 percent of the workers signed up and we want you to recognize our union." We can't even go to the Board and ask for an election. Even if we had a thousand percent signed up we would have no rights. So our only hope has been the pressure of a consumer boycott.

When we started our first boycott, we were told by some experienced and very friendly unions that it wouldn't work. But it has, because we have received the support of thousands and thousands of rank-and-file labor, students, civil rights people and church groups. We have developed a nationwide network of support by sending our strikers to cities throughout the United States and Canada. We had pickets in 237 communities at one time during the Schenley boycott. This is what got us our first contract at the time that we got it. If we had not launched the boycott, our strike could never have been successful.

There are lots of people who are ready to say that this generation of farm laborers has to be written off, and that legislation, education, and so forth have to be aimed at the children. Well, I for one am not ready to be written off. This generation of children will get the food and the education it needs when the parents have enough money to take care of them.

UFWOC—A New Union

In September of 1965 our Association merged with AWOC to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. At that point the AFL-CIO chartered our union and gave us the jurisdiction of organizing farm workers. This merger brought together both unions.

I'd say that it took about six months before we really brought the two unions together. For although we were together on paper, there were problems to be dealt with. First of all, AWOC was almost 100 percent Filipino: our union was 90 percent Mexican-American and about 10 percent Negro. Growers had traditionally played ethnic group off against each other. That way they could keep wages low.

At the beginning of the strike everyone was giving us from two to three weeks, saying that we would lose like the other strikes had been lost. If you had asked me about it then, I would probably have said that failure was very possible.

But in our case something different happened—something that the other unions had never had happen in their attempts to organize workers. We received public support in our attempts to organize like no other union had experienced.

The church people, organized labor, students from SNCC, and CORE and other persons who were interested, came to our rescue, and they were able to see us through to our first victories. From then on the possibility of success was assured.

On Organizing and Being an Organizer

I am an organizer, not a union leader. A good organizer has to work hard and long. There are no shortcuts. You just keep talking to people, working with them, sharing,

exchanging, and they come along. People can be organized for anything, even the worst of causes.

The reactionaries are always the better organizers. The “right” has a lot of discipline that the “left” lacks. The “left” always dilutes itself. Instead of fighting a common enemy, the “left” splinters, and the splinters go after one another. Meanwhile the “right” goes after its objective, pounding away, pounding away.

From my experience I would say that bringing about community organization is a lot harder than labor organizing. In a labor union, at a certain point you can say, “Well, it’s organized.” But in community organization I could never see an end, a time I could say it was organized.

When I say community organization I mean the grass-roots type. It’s not the type in which you take existing organizations and put them together in a coordinating agency. When I went into an area as a community organizer, “I tried to stay away from the leaders of all existing agencies. I found my best leaders by going deep into the grass roots. Unfortunately, it has been my experience that some grass-roots leaders don’t remain grass-roots very long. The more successful they get, the less effective they seem to become.

Another reason it is more difficult to organize community groups is that they often tend to be erratic. The organization of these groups doesn’t go along smoothly: instead, there are peaks and valleys. Say you have been working in a community, and after a whole year of hard work it is organized. You go away for a few weeks and when you come back, your organization has crumbled away. You cannot organize unless there is a need for it. And until you have well developed and recognized leaders, there is no secure structure.

A movement with some lasting organization is a lot less dramatic than a movement with a lot of demonstrations and a lot of marching and so forth. The more dramatic organization does catch attention quicker. Over the long haul, however, it’s a lot more difficult to keep together because you’re not building solid. One of the disappointments of community organization is that it takes an awful lot of time to build. It takes a lot of time because people are not developed overnight. A lasting organization is one in which people will continue to build, develop and move when you are not there.

Everything in life is contagious. If you work hard enough, the other guy is going to work. Not so much because you convinced him, but because he’s downright ashamed of his not working. At first he usually doesn’t know how to work in an organization. So if you work 16 hours a day, he’s going to work 5 hours a day. If you work 24 hours a day, he’s going to work 8 hours a day. As an organizer you are going to have to work more hours than anybody else and like it. If you can’t work without complaining, then you’d better get out. What it takes you a week to build, you can destroy in one outburst.

If you’re not frightened that you might fail, you’ll never do them. If you’re frightened, you’ll work like crazy.

Being of service is not enough. You must become a servant to people. When you do, you can demand their commitment in return.