

A UNION IN THE COMMUNITY c.1969

by Cesar E. Chavez

LAND – WATER – CHEAP LABOR

Consider this combination for power and wealth: Land, plenty of free water and plenty of cheap labor. This is a most fantastic combination for anyone who wants to make money, create political influence and keep a large number of laborers unorganized.

Because of this combination, there are growers in California and the Western part of the United States who are not only rich but are also very powerful.

These are the people that control what legislation is going to be enacted in the area of agriculture and farm labor. To understand how this combination developed we must look to history.

Towards the end of the last century large numbers of Chinese workers were brought to California to work on the construction of the railroads. Soon after the railroads were built thousands of laid off workers flooded the cities of San Francisco, Stockton and Sacramento.

Large scale farming began to develop soon after this influx of Chinese. Growers who had the land and water now had an abundance of cheap labor.

It was during this period that the farm-labor contractor and crew pusher first appeared. This system really wasn't so much a discovery of the growers as it was of some Chinese who knew that there was money in contracting for jobs and bringing their people to work.

The system was simple. Chinese crew bosses recruited workers in the cities, bringing them into the valley. Large portions of the workers' wages were then deducted for "expenses."

Soon after the Chinese went to work in the fields, they realized that there was no real future there. As time went on they returned to the cities, going into small businesses of their own.

After that large numbers of people were imported from Japan, India, the Philippines and Mexico. The Japanese did not stay in the fields very long; instead, some of them began to work their own small farms.

The first large migration of Mexicans came to the United States during the Mexican Revolution. In 1916, alone, almost a quarter of a million Mexicans crossed the border from Mexico into the Southwest. Almost all of them came to work in the fields.

In 1942, toward the beginning of the second World War, there was another large migration from Mexico. This time they came as contract Bracero workers. This system stayed with us until recently it was discontinued.

From this brief history you can see that agriculture in the West always depended largely on foreign workers, large numbers of workers competing against one another for the same job. If you take that along with the fact that farm workers have been excluded from every meaningful piece of labor legislation that Congress has passed, you have a pretty good explanation of our condition today.

Chapter One: Formation Of The Union

The National Farm Workers Association

In April 1962, I left a group called the Community Service Organization. This was the first group of its kind in California, working with Mexican-Americans in civic and political affairs.

I had worked with them as a community organizer for twelve years and had learned some things. One of the things that I learned was that the real problems of the Mexican-American or of the poor in California had to be solved in agriculture, out in the fields. So I went to Delano in April of 1962.

Before I started to organize I wanted to read everything I could that had been written about the past, unsuccessful attempts at organizing. I also talked to everyone available who had been involved in past strikes. I did this to find out why they had failed so often. I came up with some parallels as I talked to people and read what had been written.

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 failures.

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 the workers after the workers had revolted. The workers were out (on strike for one 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 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.

Organizing a Nucleus

Instead of staying in one community and trying to organize workers against a background of repeated failures over the past forty or fifty years, we decided to visit most of the communities in the San Joaquin Valley.

Here we were counting on our past experiences that no matter where you go, you will always find a few people ready to take up any cause you may have. We visited something like seventy-eight communities, including small rural communities and large labor camps. At each of these places we went after those people who were already convinced — those workers who wanted to fight and struggle to form a union.

At first I went out and made a survey. This survey was different from those the people in the universities do. Just a very small form card — name, permanent address, temporary address. Then I would ask only one question.

It was only one question, but it was one we thought was most important. I asked what each person thought the minimum wage should be.

I was very disappointed with what they were answering. Ninety-six percent of the people answered that they would expect \$1.25 an hour. I was disappointed because I thought they should be asking for \$2.00.

But after thinking it over, I realized that they were being practical; because they knew they couldn't get more than \$1.25, they asked for what they could get.

About 6,000 of these cards were signed and returned by the workers. Thus our organization began to create itself through activity. When the cards were received, about one in every hundred has a little note, like, "God bless you" or "It's a good thing" or "keep it up." What each of these workers was saying was "National Farm Workers Association membership for me." It was an opener — something to start with.

I went out to visit those who had written the comments. With me I took some of the 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.

At first there weren't too many people to respond. But there were some, about two hundred people, who went out and really did a job. They went out and took the time to sign people up.

The most important thing about signing 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 them. When you get to know people, their homes 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.

We were able to get about four hundred workers who became the nucleus of our union. What many people didn't understand at the time was how we could be so

successful so soon. The secret was that these people were already organized and that it was just a matter of getting them all together.

We called our first convention together in Fresno, in September 1962. At that time the union was called the National Farm Workers Association. Nowhere was there any mention of strike or the word union. Most farm workers were afraid of unions and strikes.

There we adopted a very ambitious program. We set up a community program to try to meet the needs of the workers on an individual basis. Using this program and allowing a lot of time we wanted to gradually develop a group which would move from a community setting in which brotherhood was created through individual help and attention to personal problems. This would give us 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 one hundred dollars 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.

As the 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 a half years no one knew what we were doing except for our most immediate friends.

We started by setting a credit union and a co-op program to help get such things as insurance and automobile parts. 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.

We know that we can provide these things at about a 50¢ discount if we buy directly from San Francisco. That is the amount of regular mark-up on these things. So we sell them for 40% less with a 10% mark-up.

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.

Dues

We felt that organizers shouldn't be paid until the workers were able to pay them. This puts pressure on the organizer to bring in the bacon so that he can get his cut.

We felt that during the early stages of the union it shouldn't be subsidized, because this would create a dependency. We didn't want to get money from anyone to organize our union.

We knew that when the time came for a strike we would need money from wherever we could get it, but during the initial organizing period we didn't want to have any strings attached to money. We decided not to accept money so that we would be free to put our own ideas into motion.

We wanted the workers to prove to us, and we wanted to prove to ourselves, that they really wanted what we were doing. They assured us that they really wanted a union by their monthly contribution of \$3.50 dues.

We were criticized by our close friends who knew what we were doing because they thought that this was too much money to pay. They began to say that workers were coming to the meetings not only because we were dealing with individual problems but also because they had an investment.

If they had been active in the union for a year, they had \$42.00 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 union.

I remember during the first winter of the organizing drive going out to their homes and calling 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 five dollars in his hand and he gave it to me. When I gave him back \$1.50 in change he told me that he was going 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 in the hopes that someday he would have something. If I refunded the money I would forget the idea of workers paying their own way while they were building a union.

It was difficult because I was also caught up in the fact that 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 who had paid the dues under severe conditions had 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 services were theirs.

During my seventeen years of community organizing we would say, "The poor worker — he can't pay." The workers get help and walk away. Now in our Association the worker pays his union dues and in that way pays for his services. We tell them, "We want you to come and demand service, but first of all you have to pay your dues."

Chapter Two: Excerpts From The Organizer's Notebook

Community Organization

I don't really consider myself a labor organizer. I have a lot of love and sympathy for anyone who is doing community organization. To be successful requires working twenty-three and twenty-four hours a day.

From my experience I would say that brining about community organization is a lot harder than labor organizing. 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.

Grass Roots Organization

When I say community organization I mean the grass roots type. It's the type in which you take the existing groups 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 root 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 the fact that they often tend to be more erratic. The organization of these groups doesn't go along smoothly; instead, there are peaks and valleys.

Say you have been working with a community organization, and after a whole year of hard it is organized. You say, "Now I'm going to take a vacation. When I get back, I'll open the freezer, take out the community organization, thaw it out, and we'll be on the road again."

It's not going to wait for you and you know it. If a community organization is started and it seems to be going very well and something goes wrong, then you've lost it. It's disappeared on you.

Another point is that you can't really organize anything unless there is a need for it. However much you may want to organize really doesn't matter unless the people feel that there is some purpose and that they are going to gain something from it.

The fact that poor people are not organized is not because they don't want to organize or that they have no need to organize. It is because those who are leaders or who want to be leaders are unable to organize them.

We have to blame ourselves continually if it can't be done. We are the first ones to say that we are doing such a good thing and wonder why people don't understand.

I have often heard organizers saying thing 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 progress.

This has happened many times. We have a beautiful program in the community. We're using the radio, TV, posters and any other media we can use. We call a meeting with the people for our very important program. But when we get to the auditorium to meet with the people there are perhaps only four or five people present, all members of our communities.

At this point we really have to examine ourselves. The reason that they did not come is that the program is not what they want.

We should not expect them to come and say, "Mr. Organizer, what we want is a program," and then draw a little picture for us and color it in with detail. They will not do that.

We must pay very close attention to the people; because in their own actions, in their very breath, they are telling us what they want all the time.

The most successful union programs have not come about by the people saying we ought to do this or that. They come instead and say, "It's too bad . . . I wonder, you know." That's all they say.

You must pay attention to them, and you understand in a million ways what they are trying to tell you. You understand, you get a message from them of what they want.

There have been times when we have caught ourselves up in a real struggle, so much that we have almost lost faith that we will succeed. It is then when one of the workers will say something that gives you the idea.

Now these ideas do not come from the people in black and white or even very clearly. But we go from Roman numeral One, Roman numeral Two, small (a), small (b), small (c). Ideas take time to develop. If we were checkers or chessmen, then we could do it in another way. But we're not.

I learned a great lesson from some of the good organizers that I work with, and from St. Paul, in whom we have the best example of organizing. He went into the homes of the workers, of the people, and we have to go to their homes.

Contacts

We have to start one by one. You may have 50,000 people in your community and by the mere fact that you have 50,000 you may feel that it is impossible. This is because you think of 50,000 as just that, instead of thinking of 50,000 individuals.

Most of the things we do are done individually. When we count, we don't usually count by hundreds or thousands. When we count, it is one, two, three. This is the way you count money, count hours. Why not apply the same rule to people?

When we started the Association we would go into strange towns. These were small towns of 5,000 10,000, or 15,000 population. In some cases half the total population were farm workers.

While I had contacts in a few of the communities, in most of them I had no contacts at all. I like it better that way. When you begin by knowing your neighbors, you begin to eliminate them.

When you say, "Well, my cousin over there. No, she's not interested." "My uncle? No, he's against it." "My mother? She's too old." "My brother? He's only interested in TV."

If you were not to know the people, you would go out there full of spirit to sell them on the idea. In some cases you might be going through a town, you come to the first house and say, "Gee, that house. I wonder if a farm worker lives there?" It looks very nice, you know. So you pass it up. You go to another house, and it's sort of run down with a lot of kids playing outside and you decide, "No, those people aren't interested." Before you know it, you've eliminated everybody.

What this means is that 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 he thinks that there is in most cases a natural reaction to pay attention to what you have to say. He listens.

Commitment

You can't come into a community with the idea of being of service to people. That's not good enough. Even "total commitment" is not good enough. If you come in,

you become a servant to it. If you can get yourself to be a servant, then you will be a good community organizer.

Being of service to people is not good enough because if you are of service to people, you do the service at your own convenience. Being a servant, you'll get ordered around and you'll do it.

Dignity As An Issue

No issue can get people excited and interested in doing something about a problem as much as when personal dignity is involved. No injury is greater than not being looked upon as a human being. The deepest kind of hurt is when you find you're not welcome, when even by the tone of voice you are addressed you know that you are not considered to be anyone. This is the kind of stuff that gets you going.

The working conditions and the wages, the lack of drinking water, the lack of education, the lack of housing, all hurt but not so deeply as personal injury.

I think that most of the people involved in the strike have been hurt in this way. Wages are not our main issue in the strike. If this was our main issue, it would disappear after you got the union in to get an increase in the pay.

If your issue disappears, you're out of business. We've increased wages considerably in all the places we have contracts. And in most of the places we don't have contracts they have raised the wages to try to keep the union out. But the strike goes on.

Don't Romanticize The Poor

The most precious of all elements that we deal with is the human being. We are interested in justice and in not confusing justice with charity. We are also concerned that we do not romanticize the poor, or that we do not romanticize the Negro or the Mexican.

We cannot help people or even help ourselves unless we understand first of all that they are human beings subject to all the same temptations and faults as all other human beings.

As minority groups we don't want to be romanticized as being disadvantaged. We are and we knot it. Let's do something effective to end that discrimination whatever it is. We want to see ourselves as human beings and we want other people to see us that way.

For instance, a lot of young college people have come to Delano to help us and they are very romantic about it. They come and say, "Gee, the poor farm workers." The growers, they feel, are the devils.

We always have to tell them, "Don't romanticize the poor people." This is a very hard-nosed operation. Members that pay their dues get the service; those that don't pay their dues we don't give any service.

These young people finally accepted our idea after putting forth all kinds of arguments. If they don't accept our very human attitude about human beings; if they continue to be romantic about helping poor people, then they're going to be mighty disappointed within a very short time.

You'll find that poor people have faults too — all of us have faults. If you go out armed with this idea, then you'll be ready to do the most important of the job.

Poverty Programs

Poverty programs generally throughout America are just being used by the poor in most cases. You can't expect to help someone and just help him. There has got to be some responsibility attached to that help, and this is where the great majority of community organizers fail.

You've got to make the individual who is receiving help a responsible person. You've got to be very hard-nosed about it.

This is the way you bring people into the organization. This is the way they begin to participate. If they come and use you to get service, they usually will ask, "How much do I owe?" If you're in the poverty program you'd answer "Oh no. This is paid for by the government. You don't owe me a cent." Well, that's just what you'll get from them.

When they say, "How much do I owe you?", they are really saying, "Can I do something for you?" If you think they are asking how much money, you're missing the whole message.

You say, "Sure you owe me something. Not to me personally, but you owe something to yourself and to the movement or the organization. You owe your responsibility and participation."

Then you have to be absolutely ready to tell them exactly what you want from them. No ifs or buts. You have to be exactly sure.

Another point is that when you tell people that you have a good program and you keep telling them what to do, a time will come when you want them to do something and then you can't tell them what to do.

For instance, let's say some person comes to you when you are organizing and being very much interested in what you're doing he says, "What can I do to help?"

It is most important that when someone asks you how he can participate that you are prepared to tell him, in language that he will understand exactly. He must know what it is you want of him. You just don't give an outline. You give that outline, you paint a picture; and, if the message happens to be in Technicolor, you paint in all the colors. This should be done so that he can grasp exactly what it is you want him to do so that he can go out and do it.

Leaders

Any program to be successful has to be worked on very hard by the leadership. The membership can suggest a program, but it is up to the leadership to implement it.

It will be a great day when the leadership wants to implement programs that will put them out of business. We must be open to many ideas of how to do things.

If you're a successful organizer, the day is going to come when your members are going to tell you, "Well, get the hell out." At that point you can say, "Gee, these fellows are really developed." Then you can step out.

The development of leadership is not a question of everybody's being developed at the same time. Some people are more advanced than others. You begin by working with those who are more advanced until you have them involved.

Some people will come only because they have personal problems. When you involve these people in an issue it ceases to be a personal problem as it involves them with others.

No matter where you go; or what cause you have, you'll find someone to buy that project or cause. There are people everywhere who are willing to accept whatever idea you have. Not many, but a few. That's how we started the union.

I knew that there were a few people in every community — one, two, three, four or five people — who were already sold on the idea of a union. I didn't have to sell them. In fact, I sort of had to guard myself from having them sell me on what I was trying to sell them. This was because they were already convinced.

Within a short time we had put together 350 of these people. Overnight we had an organization. When we had our first convention everyone was ready to go. We had found our own ready-made nucleus. It was there all the time but not really connected with any other group. They wanted to go. We put them together, and that's how we started.

When we were asked how many members we had we said, "We have 350 and we can prove it!" "Gee," he replied, "it must be a good thing."

The best way to teach is by doing things. People will learn by example if it is good, and if it is bad, they'll stay away from it.

It's nice to be able to say, "Well, get together. You're poor and I'm poor, and we're going to take on the power structure." There is no relevance here, and it means nothing to most people.

But if you say, "If you and I get together, we're going to solve your problem, however small it is," then you will get a response.

If you take problems and solve them, you'll win individual victories in a step by step organizing effort. After a while, list all the people you've helped and all the problems you've helped them with. Make a list and go on the next, most difficult, step by involving them in your activities.

When you talk about organizing, if you are realistic you will understand what you are doing when you undertake to organize the poor. If this is so, you will spare yourself a lot of embarrassment.

There are 50,000 people, for example, in this one community. Don't ever expect to get 50,000 people moving together or even to come to one meeting. If you can get 5% you're great. I'll settle for 3% any day. Three percent with a good program and you're on your way.

Movements

A movement with some lasting organization is a lot less dramatic than a movement with a lot of demonstration 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 to develop a lasting organization because people are not developed overnight. This means an organization in which people will continue to build, develop and move when you are not there. This takes an awful lot of time to create.

Committees

Great things are not done by committees — great things are done by people working individually. It is when these people put their work together that we begin to have an organization.

Everything in life is contagious. If you work hard enough, the other guy is going to work because he wants to. Not so much because you convinced him, but because he's downright ashamed of his not working.

He usually doesn't know how to work in an organization. Most people are that way. So if you work sixteen hours a day, he's going to work eight hours a day.

As an organizer you are going to have to work more hours than anybody else and like it. If you don't work without complaining, then you'd better get out. What it takes you a week to build, you can destroy in one outburst.

While it is very easy for me to say that we're going to set up a committee on housing, for example, it usually wouldn't ever get out to the committee stage. I use housing as an example because we understand housing better than anything else as a WORD but not as an ACTION situation.

You can't get people around you because of a word. People come around because you are moving and doing something. A movement or an organization is just like a march or riding in a car. You're moving and you have to continue moving.

People are around and get interested only in action. They don't really need structure. I do understand that you need a certain amount of structure but just enough to operate so that you don't trip over yourself.

Have you ever considered meetings? I suspect that whoever invented meetings did it for one purpose — to control people.

The committee is also a great means of control. A committee can be a way of postponing action. It is a great political art to assign a project to a committee and then forget it.

Similarities between Urban and Rural Organizing

Some feel that there is little similarity between the problems of the farm worker and those of the city poor. I feel that there are enough similarities to make both the center of intensive organization to change things from what they are now.

We find poor people in both places. We also find injustice in both places. In both places you find discrimination against people who happen not to be white.

In both cases you also find human beings who are determined to do something to change that. Human beings who have not been able to bring change.

I feel that for the first time it is really possible to bring this change about. It's not something that our founding fathers gave us in written document, but change is really beginning to happen through a lot of hard work.

Fear

Sometimes we play tricks on our new organizers as a part of their education. For instance, once we sent a twenty-one year old, full of spirit and wanting to work, to an area about 150 miles from Delano to organize workers.

All we said was, "Go organize." "Where?" "Well, in Riverside County." "Organize what?" "Farm workers." "How?" "You know how."

So he went. He was there only one day when he called to tell us he was frightened. I told him, "Well, you've at least learned your first lesson. That you have to be frightened, or you won't do the job."

If you're not frightened that you might fail, you'll never do the job. If you're frightened, you'll work like crazy to get in all the time you can to make contact with people.

I would rather work in a community where no one knows me and I haven't prejudiced anyone out of the picture. That way everyone is a potential member, a potential participant.

Chapter Three: La Huelga: The Beginning Of A Struggle

Beginning The Strike

In September, 1965, A.W.O.C., the AFL-CIO union that had been active since 1959, called a strike against eighteen growers in the grape industry around Delano.

After calling our membership in and taking a vote, the N.S.W.A. also decided to strike. We struck the rest of the industry where we had membership asking for the identical conditions and wages which the other union was asking.

We called our meeting on September 16, 1965. This date has some significance in that it happens to be the independence day of Mexico. At the meeting our members stated that they, too, wanted their independence.

I asked that they not strike until four days later which would give us enough time to make contact with all the growers, asking them to meet with the union to negotiate the issues without a strike.

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.

Not only did they not answer our letters, but they even refused to accept our wires. Except in one case. Here the grower had died, and the farm was an estate handled by a lawyer. The lawyer wrote us that he was not going to recognize our union.

We had read that in the many attempts to organize workers violence had played a large part in the suppression of the union. We knew that from the moment we struck, justice would be about 20% for us and 80% for the opposition.

I asked the workers to take a vote to consider that this strike be a non-violent one. Many of them didn't really know what a non-violent strike 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 non-violence. This of course, was the civil rights movement. It was decided that night that we would be non-violent and we have kept to this pledge throughout our struggle.

On September 20, 1965, at 5:30 a.m., our strike started. During the first ten days almost all the workers left the fields. In the first three days wages went up from \$1.15 to \$1.25.

For the first nine or ten days of the strike, nothing was done in the fields. Most of the outside strike breakers 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%, but we just want to work to get enough money to strike. But we are with you."

We brought in 2,700 workers for the night of the vote. This represented 60% to 65% of the total work force in the area. There wasn't one NO vote.

After the first two weeks we couldn't take care of everyone. We had to send some outside of the strike area to get jobs.

The Power Structure

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 twenty-four hours the city council had held a special meeting and passed a resolution condemning our "Communist ties." Both the high school and 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.

When that happened we were really shaken up, because we felt that at least the church groups would remain neutral if they didn't support us. 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, came over to tell us that he had been assigned by the sheriff 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 were working behind the picket lines had become so incensed and disturbed that there was bound to be violence.

He asked us to refrain from speaking to them or even shouting "Huelga." He told me 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.

I asked the Sheriff why was there such opposition to the word, "Huelga." 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."

My argument was that all those people were Mexican-American. All of them understood Spanish but a lot of them didn't understand English. We wanted to communicate with all of them.

He said also 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 got up and told me where to go.

The next morning forty-four of the strikers and non-strikers picketed one of the larger growers in the area. Included in this group was my wife, nine ministers, eleven 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 got a call at the office that the arrests had taken place, and the pickets wanted to know what to do.

I told Jim Drake, a minister with the California Migrant Ministry to go to the jail and pray with the strikers, letting them know that we're with them.

I went down to Berkeley to the University to beg money from the students to bail the pickets out of jail. I got there just before lunchtime, and I spoke from the steps of Sproul Hall. I asked the students to give me their money; and they gave me \$6,600, which was enough to bail the pickets out and cover the cost of legal aid to fight the case.

About a year later all forty-four cases were dismissed.

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?"

Pilgrimage, Penitence, Revolution

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. They didn't really understand our purpose in making the three hundred mile pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento.

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 non-violence.

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% of the people march. They say everybody marches.

Marching is very hard and there is a lot of suffering. While many people see only the marching aspect of it, there is a lot of breaking of the spirit plus a lot of other things that go along with discipline.

On our march to Sacramento we were trying to say that we want 100% of the people to rededicate themselves to the proposition of non-violence and for all of us to admit that we had done some things that were not right during the course of the strike.

We wanted to come back after marching for twenty-six days and part of the nights with new dedication. On the march we went through much suffering; but 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 bit about pilgrimage, very little about penance, and hardly anything about revolution.

We were mostly attacked for the revolution part of it. What we meant by revolution was a change of things. We do not want to destroy the order, but we want to change the social order to make things better for those who suffer because the order happens to be what it is.

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 re-examining ourselves in order. It is such a difficult thing to do, especially when the matter of money is involved as it is in our case.

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 all of our efforts had turned into a real movement, not only in California, but in many areas where there are farm workers.

Boycotts

We have won our major contracts mainly through good economic pressure on the growers. This is because as farm workers we are 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% or 50% or 100% 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.

The reason it has worked is 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 nation-wide network of support by sending out 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.

Boycotting is a string-arm that we knew will bring results. We've seen the cases of the contracts which we now have, that it was not until the boycott took hold that we were able to get the recognition for the union.

Snakes in the Field

I have eight children, and all of them are very much interested in the strike. Paul, who is ten years old, has been so concerned about the strike that he wanted to work with me in planning and developing tactics and strategy.

Sometimes, when I would come home late at night, he would be awake and waiting for me. He had all kinds of ideas, none of which I would accept, so finally he got discouraged and quit.

I have to say here that most of his ideas were of a violent nature, and I couldn't accept them. Once he suggested that we should get snakes and let them loose in the fields so that the women strikebreakers would leave their work.

A.F.W.O.C.

In September of 1966 our association merged with A.W.O.C. to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. At the pint 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 them together. For although we were together on paper, there were problems to be dealt with. First of all, AWOOC was almost 100% Filipino; our union was 90% Mexican-American and about 10% Negro.

We had to get the two groups working together. At this point we are very united and the solidarity that has to be there is a reality. No longer can the growers divide us by races.

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, 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. Now we are organizing slowly but surely.

Beginning

If you really want to organize you'll do it regardless of the consequences. The consequences are more frightening when they are unknown than when they are known.

You think about how you can support your family and all these things. You have to make up your mind if you are going to organize farm workers that someone has to give his full time to the work and God will provide. You won't starve. I guarantee that you won't starve. I guarantee that you will take care of your family, pay your rent, and buy gasoline. You probably won't get money to pay for the telephone but you'll get money for other things.

When I started I was by myself. My wife, Helen, said that I couldn't do it by myself. She said that she should be helping. So she quit her job and she took the North side of the Valley and I took to South. Soon others came and before the year was out we had five families working.

Distributed by the Arkansas Institute for Social Justice, Inc., 523 West 15 th , Little Rock, Arkansas 72202, (501) 376-7153
