

## Profile: Cesar Chavez

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One Sunday morning last summer, I knocked on the door of a small frame house on Kensington Street, in Delano, California, that is rented by the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee for the family of its director, Cesar Estrada Chavez. It was just before seven, and no one came to the door, so I sat down on the stoop to wait. The stoop was shaded by squat trees, which distinguish Kensington Street from the other straight lines of one-story bungalows that make up residential Delano, but at seven the air was already hot and still, as it is almost every day of summer there in the San Joaquin Valley. On Kensington Street, a quiet stronghold of the middle class, the Chavez house drew attention to itself by worn yellow-brown paint, a patch of lawn between stoop and sidewalk that had been turned to mud by a leaky hose trailing away into the weeds, and a car, lacking an engine which appeared not so much parked as abandoned in the driveway. Signs that said "DON'T BUY CALIFORNIA GRAPES" were plastered on the car, and "KENNEDY" stickers, fading now, were still stuck to posts on the stoop. The signs suggested that the dwelling was utilitarian, not domestic, and that the Chavez family's commitment was somewhere else.

In the time it must have taken Chavez to put on the clothes that are his invariable costume—a plaid shirt and work pants—and to splash water on his face, the back door creaked and he appeared around the corner of the house. "Good morning," he said, raising his eyebrows, as if surprised to see me there. "How are you?" Though he shook my hand, he did not stop moving; we walked south on Kensington Street and turned west at the corner.

Chavez has an Indian's bow nose and lank black hair with sad eyes and an open smile that is both shy and friendly. He is five feet six inches tall, and since a twenty-five-day fast in the winter of 1968 he has weighed no more than a hundred and fifty pounds. Yet the word "slight" does not properly describe him. There is an effect of being centered in himself so that no energy is wasted, and at the same time he walks lightly.

In the central part of Delano (pronounced De-*lay*-no), the north-south streets have been named alphabetically, from Albany Street, on the far west side, to Xenia, on the east; the cross streets are called avenues and are numbered. On Eleventh Avenue, between Kensington and Jefferson, a police car moved out of an empty lot and settled heavily on its springs across the sidewalk. There it idled while its occupant enjoyed the view. Having feasted his eyes on the public library and the National Bank of Agriculture, the policeman permitted his gaze to come to rest on the only two citizens in sight. His cap, shading his eyes from the early sun, was much too small for him, and in the middle of his mouth, pointed straight at us, was a dead cigar. He looked me over long enough to let me know he

had his eye on me, then eased his wheels into gear again and humped on his soft springs onto the street. Chavez raised his eyebrows in a characteristic expression of mock wonderment. Then he waved at the back of a building that fronted on Jefferson Street. “That’s our station house,” he said, in the manner of a man who is pointing out, with pardonable pride, the main sights of his city. As we walked on, he talked about how he had come to be a labor organizer.

Until Chavez appeared, union leaders had considered it impossible to organize seasonal farm labor, which is in large part illiterate and indigent, rarely remains in one place long enough to form an effective unit, and is composed mostly of minority groups that invite hostility from local communities. In consequence, strikes, protests, and unions had been broken with monotonous efficiency—a task made easier by the specific exclusion of farm workers from the protection of the National Labor Relations Act, which authorizes and regulates collective bargaining between management and labor. In a state where cheap labor, since Indian days, had been taken for granted, like the sun, reprisals were swift and sometimes fatal, and the struggles of Mexican-American farm workers for better conditions have met with defeat after defeat.

In 1947, when Chavez was twenty, he himself picketed the cotton fields of Corcoran, a few miles north of Delano, for the National Farm Labor Union, and watched the union fail. As a migrant laborer who had not been able to afford enough time from the fields to get past the seventh grade, he often discussed the frustrations of the poor with his wife, Helen, and his brother Richard, but he saw no way to put his feelings into action until 1952. That year, when he and Richard were living across the street from each other in San Jose and working together in the apricot groves, a new venture called the Community Service Organization, which had been set up in Los Angeles to do something about the frustration of the Mexican-American poor in California, was preparing to open a chapter in San Jose. The C.S.O. was a project of the Industrial Areas Foundation, based in Chicago and headed by Saul Alinsky, who describes himself as a “social activist.” When the man Alinsky had assigned to organize the C.S.O. asked a parish priest in San Jose for a list of likely recruits, he was given the name of Cesar Chavez. “I came home from work and they told me this gringo wanted to see me,” Chavez said. “In those days, when a gringo wanted to see you it was something special — we never heard anything from whites unless it was the police. So, anyway, Helen says, ‘Oh, no, it must be something good for Mexicans—money and a better job and things!’” Chavez’s expression conveyed what he thought then about promises of something good for Mexicans. “You see, Stanford had people nosing around, writing all kinds of screwy reports about how Mexicans eat and sleep—you know—and a lot of dirty kind of stuff, and Berkeley had its guys down there, and San Jose State. All the private colleges. They were interested in the worst barrio, the toughest slum, and they all picked Sal Si Puedes.”

“What?” I said.

“Sal—“

“Escape If You Can?”

“Yah. That’s what our barrio was called, because it was every man for himself, and not too many could get out of it, except to prison. Anyway, we were just sick and tired of these

people coming around asking stupid questions. I said to hell with him. Well,, he came the next day again and said he would come back in the evening, so when I got home I went across the street to Richard's house, and in a little while this old car pulled up and this gringo knocked on my door, and Helen told him I was working late or something. As soon as he left, I came back and said 'What happened?' and she said, 'He's coming tomorrow,' and I said, 'Well, I'm not going to be here tomorrow.' So I came home from work and just dumped my lunch pail and my sweater and went over to Richard's house, and the same thing happened again. Helen said he was coming back tomorrow, and I said I wouldn't see him, and she said, 'Well, this time you tell him that, because I'm not going to lie to him anymore.' So he came and talked to me. His name was Fred Ross. I was very closed. I didn't say a thing. I just let him talk. I'd say, 'Yes,' and nod my head, but half the time I was plotting how to get him. Still, there were certain things that struck me. One of them was how much I didn't like him even though he was sincere. I couldn't admit how sincere he was, and I was bothered by not being able to look at him. And the other thing was he wore kind of rumpled clothes, and his car was very poor. Well, he wanted a meeting as soon as possible to talk about what the C.S.O. could do, and I said, 'How about twenty?' 'Gee, that'd be great!' I had my little plan, you see. So I invited some of the rough guys in the barrio, and I bought some beer and told them how to handle it — when I switched my cigarette from my left hand to my right, they could start getting nasty."

The memory of his own behavior made Chavez frown. "These damn people used to talk about fifty-year patterns, and how did we eat our beans and tortillas, and whether we'd like to live in a two-bedroom house instead of a slum room — things like that. They try to make us real different, you know, because it serves their studies when they do that. I thought this guy meant to snoop like all the rest. We didn't have anything else in our experience to go by. We were being pushed around by all these studies,. So we were going to be nasty, and then he'd leave, and we'd be even. But I knew all the time that this gringo had really impressed me and that I was being dishonest. So we had a meeting, and he came in and sat down and began to talk about the Mexican-Americans — no, not about them but about farm workers. And then he took on the police and the politicians — not rabble — rousing, either, but saying the truth. He knew the problems as well as we did—he wasn't confused about the problems, like so many people who want to help the poor. He talked about the C.S.O. and then the famous Bloody Christmas case, a few years before, when some drunken cops beat up some Mexican prisoners down in L.A. I didn't know what the C.S.O. was or who this guy Fred Ross was, but I knew about the Bloody Christmas case, and so did everybody in that room. Some cops had actually been sent to jail for brutality, and it turned out that this miracle was thanks to the C.S.O. By this time, a couple of guys began to press me for some action. But I couldn't give the signal, because the gringo wasn't a phony. I mean, how could I? I couldn't do it, that's all. So some of them got nasty, and I jumped in and said, 'Listen, the deal's off. If you want to stay here and drink, then drink, but if you can't keep your mouth shut, then get out.' They said I had chickened out, so I took them outside and explained. There were a couple of guys that *still* wanted to get this gringo, but, anyway, the meeting continued, and he put everything very plainly. He did such a good job of explaining how poor people could build power that I could even taste it, I

could *feel* it. I thought, Gee, it's like digging a hole—there's nothing complicated about it!" There was still a note of discovery in Chavez's voice, sixteen years later.

"You see, Fred was already an organizer when Alinsky hired him. I guess some of his theories came from Alinsky, but I learned everything from Fred. Anyway, I walked out with him to his car and thanked him for coming, and then I kind of wanted to know—well, what next? He said, 'Well, I have another meeting, and I don't suppose you'd like to come?' I said, 'Oh, yes, I would.' I told the others I would be right back, and I got in his car and went with him, and that was it. That first meeting . . . I'd never been in a group before, and I didn't know a thing. Somebody asked for a motion, and I didn't know what the hell they were talking about. The next day, I tried to get answers from my friends and none of us knew. We were just a bunch of *pachucos*—you know, long hair and pegged pants. But Fred had wanted to get the *pachucos* involved—no one had really done this—and he knew how to handle the difficulties that came up, and he didn't take for granted a lot of little things that other people take for granted when they're working with the poor. He had learned, you know. Finally, I said, 'What about the farm workers?' and he said that the C.S.O. could be a base for organizing farm workers, and it was a good prediction—not exactly as he envisioned it, but it came about."

Chavez laughed. "I was his constant companion. I used to get home from work between five and five-thirty, and he'd say, 'I'll pick you up at six-thirty—give you a little time to clean up and eat,' and I'd say, 'No, I don't want to clean up and eat. Pick me up at five-thirty — wait for me!' So he would be waiting when I got home from work, and I'd just drop off my lunch pal and rush right out —maybe change my shirt. I was observing how he did things, how he talked to people and how patient he was, and I began to learn. A lot of people worked with him, but few learned what I learned. I think the reason was that I had more *need* to learn than anybody else. I really *had* to learn. So I'd pay attention to the smallest detail, and it became sort of a—well, I'd use the word 'game' if it didn't throw a wrong light on it. It wasn't a job, and at the same time it was very, very important, trying to understand these things and then apply them."

Chavez first joined the C.S.O. as a volunteer in a voter-registration drive. The organization of Mexican-American bloc voting was a first lesson in his understanding of how to build a power base. "Most of the volunteers were college people, or had good jobs. Very few were farm workers. I had a part-time job in a lumberyard. The voter registration depended on as many evenings as you could give, and soon so many people stopped showing up that we had to find a new chairman every day. Finally, I was the only one who went with Fred every night, so he made me chairman. So here I am in charge, and where do I start? I can't go to the middle class, or even the aspiring middle class, for my deputy registrars—I have to go to my friends in *Sal Si Puedes*. So I round up about sixteen guys"—at the memory, he began to smile — "and not one of them can qualify as a deputy registrar, not *one*. They can't even *vote!* Every damn one of those guys had a felony!" He laughed. "Well, they could still knock on doors, you know, and they put out a lot of energy."

Some months later, with Alinsky's approval, Chavez was hired by Fred Ross as an organizer to work on voter registration and citizenship training. After six months in San Jose, he took over Ross's C.S.O. chapter in Decoto, and two weeks later was asked to start a new chapter in Oakland. He was still so poorly educated that he could scarcely read. He was small and thin, and looked much younger than his twenty-seven years, and he lived in terror of the meetings he was supposed to run. He would drive back and forth in front of the house where one was to be held, then dart in and sit in a corner until he was forced to identify himself as the organizer. But his first big meeting in Oakland was a success, and Fred Ross recognized it as a kind of turning point for him; soon after, Ross put Chavez in charge of the whole San Joaquin Valley. In the next few years, Chavez established chapters in Madera, Bakersfield, and many other towns. He was already a good organizer, and he got better as he developed techniques of his own. He learned to beware of established precepts, to cut around the entrenched local leadership, and to avoid philosophizing in favor of clear illustration and example ("You have to draw a simple picture and color it in," he often says), and, above all, he recognized that organizing required time. From forty to fifty percent of California farm workers, he estimates, are illiterate in English and nearly so in Spanish. "You have to spend time with people, that's all," he told me. "If he is interested, it makes no difference if a man can read or write—he is a man."

In the early fifties, the Cold War reaction that congealed around McCarthyism was widespread in the Valley, and a man who encouraged Mexican-Americans to vote struck many people as an obvious subversive. Cowed by local patriots, his own people in the Madera chapter began investigating Chavez for symptoms of the dread Communism, and then retreated abashed, when he challenged them to do this in his presence, not behind his back. According to Chavez, the experience taught him not so much how foolish it was to expect gratitude as how pathetically afraid poor people were. Subsequently, he had to return to San Jose and rebuild the C.S.O. chapter there; in the absence of strong leadership, the people had withdrawn again into apathy. Nevertheless, the C.S.O. was gaining strength, and its new power was reflected, among other ways, in the increased expense accounts of its staff. Politicians and professional people attached themselves to the organization for purposes of prestige, and meanwhile the organization's own leaders opposed what they regarded as Chavez's impractical demand that they try to organize a union of farm workers. At meeting after meeting, Chavez spoke out against the new luxurious habits and the softening of purpose—the "erosion," which he speaks of to this day as the thing most to be feared in his own union. To symbolize his protest, he showed up at meetings unshaven and tie-less—he has been tie-less ever since—and refused any further increase in his own salary. "To come in a new car into a community of poor people to organize them—that doesn't work," he told me. "And if you have money but dress like they do, then it's phony. Professional hunger." He grunted in disgust. "You can be hungry and have money in the bank, or you can be hungry and have nowhere to go. There's a big difference."

In 1962, having failed to interest the C.S.O. in organizing farm workers, Chavez quit the organization and settled in Delano, where he began his campaign to win for farm workers the right to organize in their own behalf that is enjoyed by all other large labor groups in the United States. The union he heads is now engaged in a strike to organize the

workers of the entire California grape industry, and it has called a nationwide boycott to support the strike. If his organization survives, it will be the first effective farm workers' union in American history.

A car coming up behind us slowed down suddenly. Chavez, like a feeding deer, showed his awareness with a sidelong flick of his brown eyes, but he did not turn, and he did not stop talking. A voice called out in Spanish, asking him if he would like a lift. He smiled and waved, then pointed to a church two streets away. "*No, gracias! Yo voy a la misa!*"

A sign giving the name of the pretty stucco church at the corner of Eleventh Avenue and Clinton Street—Our Lady of Guadalupe — was garish and utilitarian, and the churchyard was a parking lot, enclosed by a chain-link fence. But the place was planted with cypress, pines, and yew, which, in the early light, threw cool, fresh shadows on the white stucco under a red tile roof. Two white crosses stood outlined against the hot blue of the sky. Chavez hurried across the concrete. Though he had said nothing to me about church, it appeared that he had been bound here all along. "Let's just go in for a little while," he murmured. He was hurrying now as if a little late, though in fact the Mass was very near its end. Inside, he moved into the shadows on the left, where he crossed himself with water dipped from a font in the rear wall and subsided onto his knees behind the rearmost pew. The people had begun to sing "Bendito." All were standing, but Chavez remained there on his knees behind them until the hymn was finished. Alone in the shadows of the pew, the small Indian head bent on his chest and the toes of his small shoes turned inward, he looked like a child at prayers beside his bed.

Outside, under the evergreens, members of the congregation greeted Chavez.

"*Buenos días!*"

"*Cesar! Como esta?*"

At one point, Chavez answered, "*O, batallando con la vida!*" ("Oh, I am still struggling with life!") He grinned at me. A Filipino in his sixties came up with a fine, wordless smile and pumped Chavez's hand in both his own.

"That's one of the brother," Chavez said when the old man had gone. (The term "brother" is used to describe a union member, but it also has the connotation of "soul brother," and is so used by Chavez.)

A young priest, Father Mark Day, came up and spoke heartily to Chavez. The following Sunday, he said, the Catholic churches of Delano would speak out in favor of the workers' right to form a union. Hearing this, Chavez merely nodded. Many national church groups, and particularly the Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches had long ago come to his support, with personnel as well as money, and Father Day, a Franciscan, had been assigned to the farm workers in 1967. But the local clergy, Catholic as well as Protestant, had denounced the grape strike or dodged the issue, for fear of offending the growers, most of whom are Catholics of Italian or Yugoslav origin and are important contributors. Chavez's union was allowed to hold its strike vote in the parish hall of Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1965, but until Father Day and two other Franciscans took it over the church did not support the strike. ("I find it frankly quite embarrassing," Father Day has said, "to see liberals and agnostics fighting vehemently for social justice among agricultural workers while Catholic priests sit by and sell them religious trinkets along with distorted notions of Christianity.") It was only in recent months that — more and more

embarrassed by the example of outside clergy of all faiths, many of whom had marched in the union picket lines—the Delano clergy had begun making some attempts to reconcile the growers to the union.

The young priests spoke to Chavez of the large Zaninovich clan, some of whom came to Mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe. “If they would just get together with their workers,” he said, we wouldn’t have any problems.”

Chavez looked doubtful, but he nodded politely. “Yes,” he said, after a moment, “this church is really coming to life.” With Chavez, it is often impossible to tell when he is joking and when he is being serious, because he is so often both at the same time.

A worker in a soiled white shirt with a fighting cock in bright colors on the pocket stood waiting for a hearing. Though Chavez is available to his people day and night all week long, it is on Sunday that they usually come to see him, and his Sundays are all devoted to this purpose, “. . . *buscando trabajo*,” I heard the worker say when he had Chavez’s ear: he was looking for work. The man had just come in from Mexico on a “green card,” or visa, which is a symbol of the most serious obstacle that Chavez’s organizing effort faces: the century-old effort of California farmers to depress wages and undercut resistance by pitting one group of poor people against another.

By the eighteen-sixties, the Indians who were used as near-slaves in Spanish California had all but disappeared. In agricultural areas, they had been largely replaced, after the Gold Rush, by Chinese labor, originally brought in to work on the Southern Pacific Railroad. But the thrifty Chinese were resented and persecuted by a rabble of jobless whites for whom the Gold Rush had not panned out, and also by small farmers, who could not compete with the cheap labor force. Chinese immigration was ended by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and after that the big farmers turned to the importation of Japanese. The Japanese, too, were soon bitterly resented, because they undercut all other labor. Even worse, they were better farmers than the Americans and they bought and cultivated poor land that nobody else had bothered with; this impertinence was dealt with by the Alien Land Law of 1911, which prevented further acquisition of farm land by aliens. The next waves of farm laborers in California contained Hindus, Arabs, Armenians and Europeans. The Europeans and Armenian immigrants, less oppressed than other groups by the racial discrimination that had advanced the economy of California from the start, gained a strong foothold, and the parents of many of the Valley farmers of today were among those immigrants. Mexican peasants had always crossed the border more or less at will, and after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 starving refugees presented the growers with a new source of cheap labor, which, because it was illegal, had the additional advantage of being entirely defenseless. Filipinos were brought in, in the nineteen-twenties, and for a time cheap Mexican labor was undercut by cheap Filipino labor. Most of the Mexicans were deported after 1929, when the Okies and Arkies and upcountry Texans swarmed into California from the dust bowl; the Depression produced a heavy labor surplus among the native-born, and an effort was made to keep the border closed. Mexicans had been predominant in the farm-labor force from 1914 until 1934, and in those years, because of their illegal status, they had tended to be more tractable than other groups. For the most part, it was Filipinos and Anglos—as non-Mexican whites are called in California—who staged the

famous farm strikes of the nineteen-thirties. The Filipinos became known during this period for their militance and for refusal to scab on other workers or underbid them. After the Philippine Islands Independence Act of 1934, the importation of Filipinos came to an end, and their numbers have been dwindling ever since. By 1942, the Chinese had long since moved to the cities, the Japanese had been shut up in concentration camps, the Europeans had graduated from the labor force and become farmers, and other Anglos had drifted into the booming war economy of factories and shipyards; the minority groups that remained were not numerous enough to harvest the enormous quantities of produce that the war demanded. The farm labor emergency was met by a series of agreements with the Mexican government known collectively as the *bracero* program, under which large numbers of Mexican field hands, or *braceros*, were brought into California and other states of the Southwest by truck at harvest time and trucked out again when the harvest was over. The *bracero* program was so popular with the growers that it was extended when the war ended. In Washington, lobbyists for the growers argued successfully that Americans would not do the hard stoop labor required in harvesting cotton, sugar beets, and other crops hence the need for extension of the *bracero* program. Everyone conveniently forgot that the white fruit tramps of the thirties had done plenty of stoop labor, and that workers of all colors were available to the farms if a living wage and decent conditions could be obtained. But the Mexicans, whose poverty was desperate, worked long, hard days for pay as low as sixty cents an hour, and were used to undermine all efforts by indigenous workers to hold out for better treatment. By 1959, an estimated four hundred thousand foreign workers (mostly Mexicans but including small numbers of Canadians, in the potato fields of Maine, and British West Indians, in the Florida citrus groves) were obtaining work in the United States, although four million people here were unemployed. Churches and various citizen's groups began protesting the lot of the farm workers—especially that of domestic migrant laborers—and at the end of 1964 Public Law 78, the last and most notorious phase of the *bracero* program, was allowed to lapse. (This was a year in which Congress passed significant poverty and civil rights legislation, but P.L. 78 was primarily a casualty of congressional concern over the outflow of gold.) The death of P.L. 78 seemed to be the birth of hope for a farm union, but by 1965, when the current grape strike in California began, the growers had found another means of obtaining the same cheap labor. Under P.L. 414 (the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952), large numbers of foreigners were permitted to enter the United States as “permanent resident aliens,” on a special green visa card. “Green-carders” can become citizens after five years of residence—and pay taxes, be drafted, and qualify for Social Security while they wait. A migrant agricultural worker can earn fifteen times as much for a day's work in the United States as he can in Mexico, but most Mexicans have declined the opportunity to become citizens. Instead, they “commute,” taking their high harvest wages—an estimated fifteen million dollars' worth in 1967—back to their homes each year. Under the law, no green-carder is supposed to work in a field where a labor dispute has been certified, but enforcement has been desultory, to say the least, and although almost half of the members of Chavez's union are not United States citizens, many Mexicans have become strikebreakers. As long as farm workers are excluded from the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act, they have no legal means of forcing employers to negotiate. When their strike was subverted by imported



scabs and anti-picketing injunctions, they resorted to what the growers call an “illegal and immoral” boycott.

The man with the fighting cock on his shirt was a union green-carder who did not wish to cross picket lines. At the moment, however, there were more union workers than union jobs—only three growers out of several dozen in the Delano area had signed contracts with the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee — and Chavez encouraged the man to take a job wherever he could find it. He did not have to encourage the man to help the union on the job by whatever means he could; the man complained that Social Security payments had been deducted from his last paychecks even though no one had asked for his Social Security number. Chavez says that workers who cannot read are chronic victims of petty paycheck chiseling on the part of both labor contractors and growers. “Those people make a lot of money that way,” Chavez said. “A *lot*.” At that moment he looked ugly. “In the union, they get an honest day’s pay, because both sides understand the arrangement and accept it. Without a union, the people are always cheated. And they are so innocent.”

We walked on along Eleventh Avenue to Albany Street and turned south along cotton fields. The day was hot now, and the flat farmland stretched away unbroken into dull mists of agricultural dust and sprays, still unsettled from the day before, that hid the round brown mountains of the Coast Range. Chavez said that many of the green-carders, and especially those who intend to return to Mexico, felt they could do better than the union wage scale by working furiously for non-union growers on a piecework basis; others refused to join the union out of ignorance—they had never heard of a union—or out of fear of reprisal. “Out at Schenley—we have a contract there now—there was a guy named Danny,” Chavez said. “Danny was so anti-union that he went to the management and said, ‘Give me a gun. I’ll go out and kill some of those strikers.’ He just hated us, and he didn’t know why. He was working inside when we came with the picket line, and I guess he felt guilty about not joining us, so he went too far. And also, he told me later, ‘I didn’t know what a union was. I never heard of a union—I had no idea what it was or how it worked. I came from a small village down in Mexico.’ You see? It’s the old story. He was making more money than he had ever seen in Mexico, and the union was a threat. Anyway, we won there, and all the guys who went out on strike, they got their jobs back. And, man, they wanted to clean house, and they wanted to get Danny, and I said no. ‘Well, he doesn’t want to join the union,’ they said. ‘And if he doesn’t join the union, he can’t work here.’ And so I challenged them. I said, ‘One man threatens you? Do you know what the real challenge is? Not to get him out but to get him in. If you are good organizers, you will get him, but you’re not—you’re lazy!’ So they went after him, and the pressure began to build against him. He was mad as hell. He held out for three months, and he was encouraged by the Anglos—the white guys. They had the beset jobs — mechanics and all — and they didn’t want to join the union, either. But finally Danny saw the light, and they did, too. It took about six months before we actually got down to negotiating a contract after we won the election, and by the time we got around to setting up a negotiating committee Danny had not only been converted but been elected to the committee. So when the committee walked in there, Danny was one of them, and the employers stared at him. ‘What are you

doing here, Danny?” Chavez laughed. “And now he’s a real St. Paul. He’ll never turn against the union, because he knows both sides. People who don’t know, and come on so enthusiastic and all at first, they might be turncoats one day, but not the ones like Danny. That’s why the converted ones are our best men.”

A car passed us, bursting with cries, and rattled to a halt a short way beyond. Two workers were driving a third out to the Forty Acres, the site of a new union headquarters that is being built, and Chavez suggested that we ride out there with them. The car turned west and rolled two miles through cotton and alfalfa to a barren are of mud, shacks, and unfinished construction on the north side of the road. The Forty Acres lies between a state road and the city dump. Useless for farming in its present condition, the land was obtained in 1966 from a widow who no longer wanted to pay the taxes on it. Here the car left us, to go back to town, and the third man, shouting cheerily to Chavez, went off to water some scattered saplings that were shriveling in the summer heat.

“We’ve planted a lot of trees,” Chavez said. ‘Elms, mostly, and Modesto ash—only the cheapest kinds.” He stood with his back to the road, hands in his pockets, gazing with pleasure at the desolation. “Don’t get me started on my plans,” he said. To Chavez, the Forty Acres, on which he envisions the country’s first migrant workers’ center, is already very beautiful; he goes there regularly to walk around and let his plans take shape. “There’s alkali in this land,” he said, putting it mildly. “We’re trying to get something growing here, to cut down the dust.”

Near the highway, an adobe building with an orange tile roof, designed to house gas pumps, an automobile repair shop, and a cooperative store, had recently been completed, but was not yet in use. Behind it was a temporary aggregation of shacks and trailers. These accommodated a clinic and the offices of the union newspaper, *El Malcriado* (“The Rebellious Child,” “The Non-conformist,” “The Protester”—there is no simple translation), which puts out editions in both English and Spanish every fortnight. A green trailer bearing the legend “Mobile Health Center” was a contribution of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union; its medical staff, like the staff of *El Malcriado* and most of the rest of the U.F.W.O.C. operation, was entirely volunteers. So was the labor being done, intermittently, on the headquarters building, a gray shell on the west side of the property. The work at the Forty Acres was being supervised by Chavez’s brother Richard, who was away just then on a trip to help out with the boycott to New York. “The strike is the important thing,” Chavez said, moving toward the headquarters building. “We work on the Forty Acres when we get a little money, or some volunteers.” The day before, six carpenters from a local in Bakersfield had given their Saturday to putting up gray Sheetrock interior walls, and Chavez entering the building, was delighted with the progress. “Look at that!” he kept saying. “Those guys really want to town!” He told me that plumbing had been done by a teacher at Berkeley, and that, two weeks before, forty-seven electricians from Los Angeles, donating materials as well as labor, had wired the whole building in six hours. “You should have seen it,” he said. “I could hardly get into the building. Everywhere I went, I was in somebody’s way, so I just went out through the window.” He turned in a complete circle. “Those guys *really* went to town. It’s entirely changed! The first center for farm workers in history!”

Outside again, we walked around the grounds, in the hot emptiness of Sunday. “Over there”—he pointed—“will be another building, a little training center, mostly for people in the union, the organizers and ranch committees. Non-violent tactics, you know—though if it were just a matter of non-violence; that could be studied in a monastery. It has to be real, you know—the mechanics of union work, and so forth. And also we want to be very strong about honesty. Some of these guys will be getting a lot of power as the union develops, and some will be very good and some won’t know how to handle it. If someone in the hiring is willing to take a bribe to put one guy ahead of another for a job, he may also be willing to steal a hundred dollars from the union, or accept a hundred dollars for an act of violence. There’s all kinds of chances for corruption, and things can go to hell very fast—we’ve seen that in other unions. So the best way to teach them is by example.”

Chavez glanced at me. He is the least boastful man I have ever met, and, being a truly humble man, he does not waste his own time or his listener’s with false humility, yet he is uncomfortable when the occasion arises to speak about himself, and may even emit a gentle groan. He grinned suddenly, glad to change the subject. “You know, we have some great guys in this union, some really great guys. We’ve put together farm workers and volunteers, people who just wanted to do something for the cause. We have so many volunteers that we save only the best. In a way, we’re all volunteers, even the ones — the lawyers and everybody — whose salaries are paid by outside people. They’re not making any money. You start paying the strikers for what they should do for themselves, then everything is done for money and you’ll never, never be able to build anything. Most of us work for five dollars a week. Outside people thought we were crazy—the Teamsters and everybody—but really it’s the only way we can stay in business. It’s a long, long haul, and there isn’t any money, and if we start paying wages, then it means that only a *few* can be hired, and a few can’t do as much as many. It has to be done that way. I’ve been in this fight for too long, almost twenty years, learning and learning, one defeat after another, always frustration. And then, of course, raising a family—you have to get your family to suffer along with you, otherwise you can’t do it, you know. But finally we are beginning to see daylight, and that’s a great reward. And then, you see, these farm workers will never be the same. If our union was destroyed today, these people would never go back to where they were.”

Under the eaves of the garage, in the shade of its north wall, a blue wooden bench had been placed against the adobe. We sat there for an hour or more, cut off from the hot highway by the cool clay wall. Across the property to the north, dead cars glittered on the crown of the city dump, and to the west was a farm, with a solitary black-and-white cow in the barnyard; surrounding all was the flat, low, dusty green of vast crops. The adobe walls and orange tile roof were Chavez’s own wish, to be repeated in the other buildings as they take shape; this idea came from the old Franciscan missions and from an adobe farmhouse of his early childhood. “The people wanted something more modern—you know, kind of flashy—to show that they had a terrific union going here, but I wanted something that would not go out of fashion, something that would last,” he said. Eventually, the entire Forty Acres will be surrounded by a high adobe wall, which will mercifully shut out its grim

surroundings. The flat, hard sky will be broken by trees, and there will be a fountain in a sunken garden, and a central place where no cars are to be permitted.

Chavez drew his hopes in the dust with a dead stick. “Inside the walls, paths will lead everywhere, and we’ll have places for the workers to rest,” he said. “There will be little hollows in the walls — you know, niches, where the people can put little statues if they want, or birds and things. We’ll have frescoes. Siqueiros is interested in doing that, I think. This place is for the people, and it has to grow naturally out of their needs.” He smiled. “It will be kind of a religious place, very restful, quiet. It’s going to be nice here.” He gazed about him. “I love doing this—just letting it grow by itself. Trees. We’ll have a little woods.” He pointed to some Arizona cypress that had been planted along the property lines, but I noticed that many of the seedling trees had yellowed and died in the heat.

Near the blue bench, a shaded passage penetrated the building. Opening off it to the left was a back door to the cooperative store, which was stocked with food for the strikers donated by individuals and agencies all over the United States. (During the strike members have been able to get food there when not holding a job, and, if necessary, their rent has been paid out of the strike fund.) Opposite this back door to the cooperative was the door of a small storeroom, eight feet by six. It was in that small room, behind thick walls that sealed away the sounds of the outside world, that Chavez had fasted for some three weeks.

The fast began on February 14, 1968, just after Chavez returned from a fund-raising tour around the country. (Of such tours Chavez once remarked, “The speaker is just a little man in a big box. When the speech is over, he is put back in his box and carried on to the next place.”) Everywhere he had gone, the militant groups that supported him or sought his support had been talking about the violence that was being planned for the summer of 1968, and in Delano his own people were rivaling the growers with loose talk about quick solutions. It was winter, in the hungry time between the pruning and the girdling of vines, and the grape strike had been going on for two and a half years, and the workers were muttering that they had waited long enough. Hadn’t violence got results in the ghetto riots of 1967? Perhaps a little burning in Delano, or an explosion or two, might force the growers to negotiate. Chavez could not deny this. “If we had used violence, we would have won contracts long ago,” he once told me, “but they wouldn’t be lasting, because we wouldn’t have won respect.” Depressed, he decided on the fast as a kind of penance for the belligerence that had developed in his own union.

Chavez had fasted twice before, for periods of four days and ten days; he had no idea when he began how long this fast would last. “I started to fast on a Wednesday, and on Monday I called a special meeting in town and told the people what I was doing. I said that there was nothing to debate or decide, because it was a personal decision—that I knew I would not be able to carry out all my duties, because I would be in bed, but that I would do the best I could, and would always be available to them. I told them I thought the best place for the fast was our own Forty Acres. I told them that I didn’t want anybody else to fast. Somebody might say, ‘Well, if Cesar can do it I can do it,’ but there was no reason for them to starve themselves. For me, it was different—I was prepared and everything. So I

got out of the meeting and I walked a couple of miles, and then Helen got a ride and caught me, and walked with me the rest of the way out here to the Forty Acres. I told everybody that the fast should be kept as secret as possible, and that if it got out I wouldn't talk to the press. The people could come to see me day or night, and the strike should go on as usual. But it didn't, and there was a lot of confusion. Even at the meeting, there were some people against, some people for. It was the sixth day or the eighth day before everybody accepted it. When I disappeared, there was a rumor that I had been shot, and then everybody said that I was very sick, and finally we had to tell them the truth, but we still said we didn't want any interviews or pictures or anything. I didn't talk to the newsmen—didn't want to. I just wanted to continue working.”

He laughed, “I did more organizing out of that bed than I did anywhere. It was really a rest, though. To me, it was a vacation. As soon as the word got out, the members began to come. Just people! From all over the state! Mexicans you know—farm workers. We estimated that ten thousand people came here during the fast—we never turned anybody away. And Negroes came, and Filipinos. Everybody! I didn't know how the people were going to respond to the fast, but the Filipinos and the Mexicans have very similar traditions—the Spanish went to the Philippines and they did pretty much what they did in Mexico. Anyway, everything went beautifully. The Filipinos came and began to paint the windows in some of the buildings, and all kinds of little things began to appear. They weren't artists, but the thing looked *beautiful*.” He spoke this last word with great intensity, turning to look at me. “I think the fast was a sort of rest for the people, too. You know? Oh, I could go on for days about the things that happened in the fast that were really great! I guess one time I thought about becoming a priest, but I did this instead, and I'm happy to be a part of it. For me, this work is fun. It's really fun! It's so great when people participate. Mexico is such a poor country, and I could never understand how after the Revolution they could produce all that beautiful art. But now I see it in our own strike. It's only a very small revolution, but we see this art beginning to come forth. Art is becoming important to the people, and they are bringing these things. When they find themselves like this, they begin to appreciate some of the other things in life. I didn't understand this at first, but they began to bring things. Offerings, you know—religious pictures, mostly. Some people brought a hundred-and-fifty-year-old Christ of the Miners, handmade out of silver down in Mexico, and there were some other really valuable pieces. We've got everything safe, and we'll put it on display one day here at the Forty Acres. The only pictures we got that weren't of Christ or of a saint were of John Kennedy—there were many of them. And the people learned more about Martin Luther King and about Ghandi in that fast than if we had sat them down for a whole year of lectures.

“Something else very beautiful happened. For years and years, the Mexican Catholics have been very discriminatory against the minority Mexican Protestants. They didn't know anything about them, and I didn't like it a bit. Well, we used to hold Mass very day in the store across from my room—we made it into a kind of chapel. And about the fifth day a Protestant preacher came. He works out there at Schenley, and he has a little church in Earlimart. And I said, “How would you like to come and preach at our Mass?” And he

said, 'What?' I mean, such a thing had never happened, and he thought he would be stoned, because there was a lot of nonsense still going on between Catholics and Protestants. It told him this was a wonderful time to begin to repair some of the damage that had been done, the bad feelings, but he said, 'I can't preach here. I'll get thrown out.' I said, 'No, if that happens I'll go out with you.' So he said, 'All right, fine.' And when he came I introduced him, gave the full name of his church and everything, so there was no room for doubt about where he came from. And he did it in great form, something like the Negro Southern preacher, but it wasn't too much or anything. He knew the Bible by heart. He spoke about non-violence—from Matthew. And the people accepted him. There was a great spirit. They just took him in. So three days later I asked another one to come, and he came, and he was also great, and then a Negro minister came — it was beautiful. So then I went back to the first one and told him to come again and bring his whole group and sing some of those Mexican Protestant hymns. He said, 'Gee, no.': Chavez shrank back and imitated the clergyman's voice. 'Sure,' I said. 'The people will love it.' So they came and sang some real great Mexican Protestant music that we're not familiar with because of that prejudice. And now our Franciscan priest has gone and preached out there, in that little Protestant church in Earlimart!"

I asked him if his concept of the fast derived from Gandhi.

"Well, partly," he said. "In India, fasting is part of the tradition — there's an Indian engineer here who is a friend and comes to see us, and he says that in India almost everybody fasts, but Mexicans have the Catholic concept of sacrifice. The *penitencia* is part of our history. In Mexico, a lot of people will get on their knees and travel for five miles. I didn't know much about Gandhi, so I read everything I could get my hands on about him, and I read some of the things that he had read, and I read Thoreau, which I liked very much. But I couldn't really understand Gandhi until I was actually in the fast. Then the books became much more clear. Things I understood but didn't feel—well, in the fast I *felt* them, and there were some real insights. There wasn't a day or a night that I lost. I slept in the day when I could, and at night, I read. I slept on a very thin mattress, with a board—soft mattresses are no good. And I had the peace of mind that is so important. The fasting part is secondary."

In the heavy Sunday silence of the Valley, Chavez got up from the bench and stretched and grinned, and we went back out into the sun. Ten o'clock had come and gone, and the blue sky had paled to a blue-white. In one corner of the Forty Acres, just off the highway, was a heavy wooden cross, made of old telephone poles, with ten-foot arms. It had been consecrated soon after the fast, and after the assassination of Robert Kennedy it was covered with a shroud. In late June, after two attempts to burn it, vandals had sawed it down. The charred remnants had been left there in the mesquite-desert dust, so that no one on either side should forget the event. Chavez glanced at the despoiled cross but made no comment. We went out onto the highway and walked toward town.

During the fast, Chavez subsisted on plain water, but his cousin Manuel, who often guarded him and helped him to the toilet, was fond of responding to knocks on the door by crying out, “Go away, he’s eating!”

I asked if in the fast he had had any hallucinations.

“No, I was wide awake,” he said. “But there are certain things that happen, about the third or fourth day, and this has happened to me every time I’ve fasted. It’s like all of a sudden when you’re up at a high altitude and you clear your ears. In the same way, my mind clears — it is open to everything. After a long conversation, for example, I could repeat word for word what had been said. That’s one of the sensations of the fast. It’s beautiful. And usually I can’t concentrate on music very well, but in the fast I could see the whole orchestra and everything, that music was so clear. That room, you know, is fireproof, and almost soundproof—not quite but almost. There’s a ten-inch wall, with six inches of poured concrete. There were some Mexican guitars around—this was about the nineteenth day — and I turned to Helen and my brother Richard and some of my kids and said, ‘I hear some singing.’ So everybody stopped talking and looked around. ‘We don’t hear anything.’ So I said, ‘I’ll bet you I hear singing!’ So this time they stopped about forty seconds. ‘But we don’t hear anything!’ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘I still hear singing.’ Then my sister-in-law glanced at Richard. Her expression was kind of funny, so I said, “We’d better investigate this right now, because either I’m hearing things or it’s happening.’ They said it was just my imagination, and I said, ‘Richard, please investigate for me, right now, because I won’t feel right if you don’t.’ So Richard went outside and there were some guys there across the yard having a drink, and they were singing.” Chavez laughed. “Then, toward the end, I began to notice people eating. Helen and everybody. I’d never really noticed people *eat*. It was so . . . so . . . “ He struggled for words to express fascination and horror. “Well, like animals in a zoo. I couldn’t take my eyes off them.”

I asked Chavez what had persuaded him to end the fast.

“Well, the pressure kept building, especially from the doctor. He was getting very concerned about the acids and things that I didn’t know anything about. A kind of cannibalism occurs, you know—the acid begins to eat your fat, and you have to have a lot of water to clear your kidneys. First of all, at the beginning, I wouldn’t let him test me. I said, “if you declare me physically able to begin the fast, then it’s not a sacrifice. If you find out that I’m ill, there will be too much pressure not to do it. So let me begin, and after I’ve started, *then* we’ll worry about what’s wrong with me.’ But I forgot that the doctor was responsible for me—that if something went wrong with me he would get it. So I argued and he worried. Finally, after the twelfth day, I let him check my urine, and about the seventeenth day I let him check my heart, and he said, ‘Well, you’re fit.’ And I said, ‘I know I’m fit. I knew it when I got into this.’” On the twenty-first day of the fast, Chavez’s physician, Dr. James McKnight, insisted that he take medication, and also wanted him to drink a few ounces of bouillon and unsweetened grapefruit juice. Dr. McKnight and many other people felt that Chavez might be doing himself permanent harm. Chavez did not agree. He said that the back pains that had been bothering him for about ten years gave

him less trouble during the fast than they had for some time, and that the chronic headaches and sinusitis from which he had suffered also disappeared. “After the fast they give me a complete analysis—blood and all that stuff — and do you know something?” Chavez smiled, shaking his head, “I was perfect!”

Chavez told me that he could have gone on longer than he did, but that the pressure—all kinds of pressure—kept mounting. He smiled again. “Usually there was somebody around to guard me—give me water, or help me out if I had to go to the restroom — but one time, about two o’clock in the morning, they were singing out there, and then they fell asleep, and the door was open. And this worker came in who had come all the way from Merced, about fifty miles from here, and he’d been drinking. He represented some workers’ committee, and his job was to make me eat and break my fast.” Chavez laughed. “And he had tacos, you know, with meat, and all kinds of tempting things. I tried to explain to him, but he opens up this lunch pail and gets out a taco—still warm, a big one—and tries to force me. And I don’t want to have my lips touch the food. I mean, at that point food is no temptation—I just thought that if it touched my lips I was breaking the fast, you see, and I was too weak to fight him off. This guy was drunk, and he was pretty big, and so he sits on top of me, he’s wrestling with me, and I’m going like this.” Chavez twisted and groaned with horror, rolling his eyes and screwing up his mouth in an imitation of a man trying to avoid a big, warm taco. “Oh! Ow!” he cried. “Like a girl who doesn’t want to get kissed, you know. I began to shout for help, but this guy really meant business. He had told his committee, ‘Look, you pay my gas and I’ll go down there and make him eat. He’ll eat because I’ll *make* him eat. I won’t leave there *until* he eats.’ So he didn’t want to go back to Merced without results. First he gave me a lecture, and that didn’t work. Then he played it tough, and that didn’t work. Then he cried, and it didn’t work. And then we prayed together, and that didn’t work, either.”

I asked if the man was still sitting on him while they prayed, and Chavez said he was. “He got my arms, like this,” Chavez gestured. “And then he got my hands, like *this*.” He gestured again. “In a nice way, you know, but he’s hurting me, because he’s so heavy. I’m screaming for help, and finally somebody—I think it was my cousin Manuel—opens the door and sees this guy on top of me. Manuel thinks he’s killing me, but he’s so surprised he doesn’t know what to do, you know, so he stands there in the door for at least thirty seconds while I’m yelling. ‘Get him off of me!’ then about fifty guys rush in and pull him out of there. I thought they were going to kill him because they thought he was attacking me. I can hardly speak, but I try to cry out, ‘Don’t do anything to him! Bring him back!’ ‘No!’ they yell. ‘Bring him back!’ ‘No!’ they yell. I’m shouting, you know, ‘Bring him back! I have to talk to him! Don’t hurt him!’” In describing this scene, Chavez made his voice quaver piteously. “So finally they brought him back. He wasn’t hurt—he was too drunk. So I said, ‘Sit down. Let me explain it.’ And I explained it, step by step, and the guy’s crying—he’s feeling very dejected and hurt.” Chavez stopped on the highway shoulder, laughing quietly at the memory, in genuine sympathy with the emissary from Merced.

“Anyway, the kids began to feel the pressure, and my father and mother,” he went on. “My dad began to lose his sleep. He’ll never talk about himself, but he’s over eighty, you know, so I got a little worried. He has fasted a couple of times himself. Once, he had



dysentery and he couldn't clear it up, and he was dying. And one of those hoboes on their way through—this was in the Depression and they were white Okies, mostly — one of them told my father not eating could take care of it. He said, 'I'll either save you or I'll kill you, and I'll be back in three days, so you think it over.' Well, my dad had been to a specialist and everything, and nobody could help him, but he said, 'Hell, how can I stop eating? I can't stop eating for even half a day.' And the hobo said, 'No, you can go for twenty days, maybe thirty days.' So, anyway, when the hobo came back my dad said he would try it. So he stopped eating, and in three days he got rid of the dysentery—there was nothing to feed it. He went for twenty days. So I said to him, 'Dad, you fasted for twenty days,' and he said, 'Yes, but that was different.' I had no set date in mind, but a combination of things made me end it on March 10th, after twenty-five days. I could have gone a few days more. I broke the fast on a Sunday—it must have been about one or two o'clock. I ate a small piece of bread. But actually I kept on fasting for the next four days, because you can't eat right away. So really I felt weaker *after* I broke my fast."

During the fast, Chavez had received a telegram from Senator Robert Kennedy ("I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I FULLY AND UNSWERVINGLY SUPPORT THE PRINCIPLES WHICH LED YOU TO UNDERTAKE YOUR FAST . . . YOUR WORK AND YOUR BELIEF HAVE ALWAYS BEEN BASED SOLELY UPON PRINCIPLES OF NON-VIOLENCE . . . YOU HAV MY BEST WISHES AND MY DEEPEST CONCERN IN THESE DIFFICULT HOURS"), and the Senator with a phalanx of the press, appeared in person on the epochal Sunday when the fast ended. Chavez had first met Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles back in 1960 — a brief early-morning meeting concerned with a voter-registration drive for John Kennedy's Presidential campaign—and in 1966, as a senator, Robert Kennedy had come to Delano for hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor. "Even then, I had an idea he was going to be a candidate for the Presidency, and I was concerned for him because he endorsed us so straightforwardly, without straddling the line," Chavez told me. "This was a time when everybody was against us—the only people for us were ourselves. He didn't have to go so far. Instead of that awful feeling against politicians who don't commit themselves, we felt protective. He said that we had the right to form a union and that he endorsed our right, and not only endorsed us but joined us. I was amazed at how quickly he grasped the whole picture. In the hearings, when they began to call the witnesses, he immediately asked very pointed questions of the growers. He had a way of disintegrating their arguments by picking at the very simple questions. He had to leave just before the hearings ended, but he told the press that the workers were eventually going to be organized, and that the sooner the employers recognized this the sooner it was going to be over. And when reporters asked him if we weren't Communists, he said, 'No, they are not Communists. They're struggling for their rights.' So he really helped us, and things began to change."

On March 10, 1968, while Senator Kennedy was in Los Angeles, he was notified that the fast was ending, and he chartered a plane and flew to Delano with Paul Schrade, head of the West Coast United Automobile Workers. At first, according to some of the people around Chavez, Kennedy seemed rather cold. "He felt kind of uneasy, and one of our

people heard him ask Paul Schrade or somebody, 'What do you say to a guy who's on a fast?'" Chavez told me. "He was only in the room with me about thirty seconds. He looked at me"—Chavez grinned mischievously—"and he says, 'How are you Ce-zar?' I said, 'Very well, thank you. And I thank you for coming.' He said, 'It's my pleasure,' or something. So then we kind of changed the subject. I was very weak, and I did not know what to say, either. I think I introduced him to Paul Schrade." Chavez laughed. "The TV people were there, and one poor cameraman got blocked out. I saw he was frantic, and I was too weak to shout, but finally I signaled to let him in, and they let him in. The poor guy was really pale. And he said, 'Senator, this is probably the most ridiculous request I ever made in my life, but would you mind giving him a piece of bread?' And the Senator gave it to me, and the camera rolled, and the man said, 'Thank you very, very much.'"

Chavez, who used to be rather stocky, had dropped from a hundred and seventy-five pounds to a hundred and forty during the fast; bundled up in a dark checked hooded parka against the March cold, he was half carried to a Mass of Thanksgiving held in a Delano park, where an altar had been set up on a flatbed truck. During the offertory, Paul Schrade, on behalf of his autoworkers, presented the union with fifty thousand dollars for the construction of its new headquarters at the forty Acres. Reles Lopez Tijerna, a leader of New Mexico's Mexican-Americans, gave a fiery speech, and Kennedy decided that he was present out of respect for "one of the heroic figures of our time." After taking Communion with Chavez, he gave a speech in a Spanish so awful that he stopped to laugh at himself. "Am I murdering the language?" he inquired, and was wildly cheered. "*Hool-ga!*" he shouted, in an effort to say "*huelga*," which is Spanish for "strike." *Hool-ga!*"

The Mass was attended by from four thousand to ten thousand people, depending on the source of the estimate, and Kennedy's meeting with Chavez and with the crowds in Delano obviously enlivened him more than anything had in a long time. "He had a heck of a time getting from where we were sitting to the car," Chavez told me. "The crowd was pushing and surging, and when he got there he didn't get in. The way the people were reacting, he wanted to stand there and shake their hands and talk to them. Everybody was afraid of so many people pushing like that, and when he got inside, the people were saying through the windows, 'Aren't you going to run? Why don't you run? Please run!' Then the car got moving, and Kennedy turned to some people in the car with him and said, 'Maybe I will. Yes, I think I will.' So when he announced his candidacy a week later, it was no surprise to us. When Paul Schrade called to ask if I would endorse the Senator and run to be a delegate, I knew it would not be honorable to ask for something in return. With most politicians, this would have been all right, but not with this man who had already helped us so much. After a three-hour discussion, our members voted unanimously that I should be a delegate, and we immediately began a voter-registration drive for the primary in June. We worked right up to the last minute. We had a beautiful time, and the drive was a tremendous success. Some precincts went out a hundred per cent for Kennedy. But I was very tired after the voting, and I felt embarrassed when my name was called at the victory rally at the Ambassador in Los Angeles, and so I left early, before the Senator came downstairs. The last time I ever talked to him was when he gave me that piece of bread."

Our shoes scuffed along on the highway shoulder, over the slag of broken stone, tar bits, glass, and flattened beer cans. Passing cars buffeted with hot wind the big yellow sunflowers that had gained a foothold between the asphalt and the dull, man-poisoned crop, and pressed toads, as dry as leaves, gave evidence in death that a few wild things still clung to life in this realm of organophosphates and chlorinated hydrocarbons. Hard-edged and monotonous as parking lots, the green fields seemed without life. The road we walked across the Valley floor was as straight and rigid as a gun barrel, without rise or curve.

Of all California's blighted regions, the one that man has changed most is this great Central Valley, which extends north and south for almost four hundred miles. The Sacramento Valley, in the northern half, was once a sea of grass parted by rivers; the San Joaquin Valley, adjourning the Sacramento to the south, was a region of shallow lakes and bulrush or tule marshes. Both of those sections of the Central Valley supported innumerable animals and birds, among which waterfowl, antelope, and tule elk were only the most common; there were also significant populations of wolves, grizzlies, cougar, deer, and beaver. To the Spanish, centered in the great mission holdings along the coast, the grasslands of the interior were scarcely known, and their destruction was accomplished almost entirely by the wave of Americans that followed hard upon the Gold Rush. Game slaughter became an industry, and the carnivores were poisoned; unrestricted grazing by huge livestock herds destroyed the perennial grasses. Oat grass, June grass, and wild rye grass gave way to tarweed, cheat grass, and thistle, which were crowded, in turn, by rank annual weeds escaped from the imported food crops of the settlers. In the last part of the nineteenth century, the huge corporate ranches were challenged for the dying range by huge corporate farms; the first big factory crop was wheat, the second sugar beets. One by one, the tule marshes were drained and burned over; by the beginning of our century, the lakes and creeks, like the wild creatures, had disappeared without a trace. As the whole Valley dried, the water table that had once lain just below the surface sank away; the search for water became fiercely competitive, and in some places people resorted to oil-drilling equipment, tapping Ice Age aquifers hundreds of feet down. To replace the once plentiful water, the rivers were dammed and re-channeled; Shasta Dam destroyed the Sacramento, and Friant Dam choked off the San Joaquin. Today, there are no wild rivers in the Valley, and very few in all of California; the streams of the Coast Range and the Sierras have been turned to irrigation, seeping across the Valley floor in concrete ditches.

A car, bulging with children, slowed down, and the driver offered us a lift; when Chavez refused, the occupants shouted in surprise. The car swayed on, and a woman's voice drifted back to us: ". . . *su penitencia?*?" Chavez, glancing at me shyly, grinned. "*Si, si,*" he murmured. "*Mi penitencia.*" The driver of the next car, seeing Chavez refuse the ride, blared a loud greeting on his horn, and a child's voice—"Hi, Mr. Chavez!"—was whirled upward and away in the hot, dusty wind of the car's wake.

A farm truck came by as we approached the town, and the sunburned face of a blond boy stared back at us. I wondered if he had recognized Chavez. "Some of the growers still get pretty nasty," Chavez remarked, after a moment. "The worst are some of these young Anglo kids. They come by and give you the finger, and you wave back at them. Then they

give you a double finger, and you wave back again. You don't wave back to make fun of them — you just wave back.”

As he spoke, Chavez stopped to pat a mangy dog, which flinched away from him; he squatted down to talk to it. “*Hay Mas Tiempo que Vida*”—that’s one of our *dichos*. “There is more time than life.’ We don’t worry about time.” (In a letter to the head of a growers’ association, he once wrote, “Time accomplishes for the poor what money does for the rich.”)

Children and a woman greeted him from a shady yard, and he called back to ask the woman about her husband’s job. The woman’s house was right next door to the old union office, now the hiring hall, a gray stucco building at the corner of Albany Street and First Avenue; this is the far southwest corner of Delano, and across the street, to the south and west, the vineyards stretch away. The hiring hall, which was originally a grocery, is in poor condition, because of old age and cheap construction, and also because of several hit-and-run assaults. “One truck backed right into it,” Chavez said, bending to show me a large crack in the wall. “Practically knocked down the whole thing. See? See what he did there?” He straightened. “They broke all these windows. One time, they threw a flaming gasoline-soaked rag through the window—that just about did it. But someone saw them and called the fire department, and they put it on the radio, and my brother Richard was listening to the radio and took off and got over here quick. He had it out before the fire department got here.” Chavez shook his head. “One second more and the whole thing would have gone.” He laughed suddenly. “Man, they used to come here with bows and shoot fire arrows into the roof! We had to keep a ladder and a hose on hand for a long time.”

Rounding the corner onto First, we approached the union headquarters, in a building known as the Pink House. Although it was Sunday, several cars were parked along the street, and two workers in clean denims stood on a bleached patch of lawn behind a low picket fence. Chavez hailed them: “*Que tal?*”

I talked with the two workers for a little while. In telling me about Chavez and the union, they interrupted each other out of pure enthusiasm. They both said that if a secret ballot could be taken, ninety-five per cent of the workers on most ranches would be pro-union but that the workers were uneducated people who did not speak English very well and were afraid. “They scared if they do anything the boss just kick them out,” one of the men said. “And if you got kids you got to work, you know. If you got kids, you got to work every day.” He was a very big man with heavy eyebrows and steel-rimmed glasses. At the mention of children, he looked worried.

“We know we livin’ in a free country, but the growers don’t know it yet,” said the other man, whose broad open face had a small mustache on it. “Why they don’t want a secret ballot? Because they afraid! When the picket line comes, they have *everything* out there to drown it out.” The man snickered with delight. “Man, they have radios, they have loudspeakers, car horns, bells!”

One non-union grower, the man told me, was paying a dollar-sixty an hour at the moment, because he needed people for the harvest, but later he could drop the wage to a dollar-forty, and anybody who didn’t like it was out of a job. Union workers had a two-year

contract, giving them a dollar-ninety an hour, which would automatically be raised ten cents the following year. Not only that but the work hours were regulated now, with time and a half for overtime.

The face of the man with glasses wrinkled in distaste. “Before Cesar was there, everybody was afraid.” To illustrate, he doffed his hat in a slow, obsequious gesture. “Now we not afraid no more.”

“We got paid vacations now,” the other man said, in a voice suggesting that he could still scarcely believe it. “We got seniority. You know Henry? Well, we got this colored fella, Henry, that was out there eleven years, and never got no seniority on the best jobs. Now he’s drivin’ a tractor, and he don’t believe it. He just don’t believe it.”

Both men were silent. Then the man with the mustache said, “I want the union for every poor people in this country. I win more money, then they must win it, too. If you got a big family, one-forty an hour is not much—you got to work twelve to sixteen hours every day. This is the way they killin’ the peoples. A man workin’ seven days a week for twenty, thirty years — I don’t think that man is livin’.”

In the late afternoon, Chavez sat down in the shade of the Pink House with a delegation of high-school students from East Los Angeles called the young Adult Leadership Group. On his busiest day, Chavez seems unhurried; he is altogether where he is. Once, I asked him about a magazine interview in which his responses to the reporter seemed too simple, and Chavez nodded. “He was in a hurry,” he said. “So I was, too.” The students were mostly Mexican-Americans, along with a few whites and blacks. Some were straight and some wore long hair and hippie beads, but all were interested in helping the union boycott by picketing the East Los Angeles supermarkets. “We had a great reception in East L.A. when we went down to get the vote out for Senator Kennedy,” Chavez told them. “I went to many polling places and talked to the ladies and the men, and they knew all about the union. We made a lot of friends there. They send us food now, and some have come to visit us in Delano. Anyway, don’t let them kid you about those grapes coming from Arizona or Mexico. In East L.A., they shouldn’t be selling any grapes at all.” He grinned. “They should only be selling tacos and tamales, things like that.” The Mexican students laughed.

Chavez talked about race prejudice and the problems he had had with it in his own union. “The *chicanos*” — the Mexican-Americans — “wanted to swing against the Filipinos. We don’t permit that against anyone. I told them they’d have to get somebody else to run the union. You don’t take a vote on those things—whether to discriminate or not. You don’t *ask* people whether they want to do that or not—you just don’t do it.” He regarded his audience of black, white, and brown students. “That doesn’t mean you can’t be proud of what you are. In the union, we’re just beginning, and you’re just beginning. Mexican-American youth is just beginning to wake up. Fiver years ago, we didn’t have this feeling. Nobody wanted to be *chicanos*. They wanted to be anything but *chicanos*. But three months ago I went up to San Jose State College and they had a beautiful play in which they let everybody know that they were *chicanos* and that *chicanos* meant something and that they were proud of it.” He paused again. “In a conflict area like here in Delano, you have to be

for your people or against them. We don't want to see anybody on the fence. I walk down the street here and I get insulted almost as many times as I get a friendly wave. And that's the way it should be—you have to be for or against. If you aren't committed one way or the other, then you might as well lie in the weeds.”

The students told Chavez that the police in East Los Angeles had become very hostile, especially against the Brown Berets, a group of young Mexican-American militants who pattern themselves after the Black Panthers. A girl said, “The Man is after everybody now. I think they're out to crush the whole *chicano* movement.” Discussing the police, the young people sounded tense and worried, and in their haste to confide their worry to Chavez, who looked worried himself, they interrupted one another.

“Them thirteen that were arrested—“

“Club you, man. They club you—“

Chavez was nodding, he has told me that he feels it is only a matter of time before brown communities start exploding like the black ones. “But those police clubs will organize the people,” he told the young visitors.

After Chavez excused himself, the students chattered excitedly among themselves. Already a few of them had acquired buttons that said “VIVA LA CAUSA!” and “HUELGA!” One of the hippie contingent, a boy with dark skin and long hair, wearing wild beads and a green Che fatigue shirt, was pinning on a “GRAPES OF WRATH—DELANO” button. “We'll show these guys,” he told me. “Cesar don't believe in violence, but we do.” Fists on hips, he tossed his chin toward his fellow-students who were squealing, jostling, squalling, and flirting their way to a bus. “The Young Adult Leadership Group,” he said, and he gave a low, mocking whistle.

At the Stardust Motel, I ran into the sunburned blond boy I had seen staring at Chavez from a pickup truck. He turned out to be the nephew of a local grower, and was working in the vineyards for the summer, before going to college. He had stared at Chavez because a foreman in the truck had said that whenever he saw a Mexican near Albany Street it was probably one of Chavez's men, and now he was actually surprised to learn that he had actually seen Chavez himself. Most of the growers, I had already discovered, had never laid eyes on this dangerous figure, and probably would not recognize him if they did. The nephew was handsome, pleasant, and polite; he called me “sir.” He said that although his generation felt less strongly than their fathers, and although some sort of farm workers' union seemed inevitable, the Delano growers would let their grapes rot in the fields before signing a union contract with Chavez. I asked if this was because Chavez was a Mexican. No, he said, it was because Chavez was out for himself and had no real support; even that three-day fast last winter had been nothing but a publicity stunt.

A few days later, I drove down the Sandrini Road to Lamont, a farming town southeast of Bakersfield, where a small vineyard was to be picketed by Chavez's people. The Lamont-Arvin-Weedpatch fields, celebrated by John Steinbeck in “The Grapes of Wrath,”

are the southern-most in the San Joaquin Valley; here the grape harvest, which had scarcely begun in Delano, thirty-five miles to the north, was almost complete.

At dawn, the hot summer air was already windless, and a haze of unsettled dust shrouded the sunrise. Trucks were unloading empty grape boxes for work crews at the ends of long rows of vines, which looked almost fresh in the thin dew, and the men in charge, standing beside their pickups, watched my strange car approaching from a long way off.

As I drew up behind the waiting vehicles, two men in the middle of the road began to argue. One said, "You don't want to do that, Abe. You don't want to do that. You do that and they'll know they're getting to you."

But the other, small and bespectacled, stomped over to my car. "You on our side?" he demanded.

His companion, a husky, dark-haired man in his late twenties, came over to calm him down. Politely, to elicit my identity, he introduced the small man—Abe Haddad. "Barling's my name," he added, hand extended. "Most people around here call me Butch." He glanced at Haddad, who glared at me, unmodified. "Our dads are partners in this field," Barling explained.

I asked how they had known they would be picketed this morning.

"How did you know?" Haddad countered.

I said that I had learned it from the union office.

"Well, we have a spy system, too," he said. "But their system is a hell of a lot better." He pointed to some unpicked vines near the public road, where his pickers would be working within easy reach of the voices from the picket line. The pickets, he said, would arrive around seven-thirty, when the pickers were well settled at their work. If even one worker could be persuaded to walk off the job and give his name to agents of the United States Department of Labor, then a labor dispute could be certified, under P.L. 414. "I think me and Johnston's are the only ones left around here that do not have a certified strike," Barling remarked. But, in fact, I knew he was wrong: several people had walked off the Johnston farm after work the day before.

Haddad and Barling told me that Chavez had been losing ground with the workers. "As far as your local help here, they don't want no part of him," Haddad said. "They wish he'd get the hell out of here."

I asked why.

"Because they're makin' more money here than they could ever make with the union!" Haddad said.

"The union, they only work a forty hour week, so even with their wage increase they make less money," Barling said. "On your union ranches, sure the wages are just as good, maybe better, but they don't let 'em work the hours, work the days. The union is tryin' to run a farm like a factory, and you cannot run a farm like a factory!"

When Haddad had gone, Barling acknowledged that the boycott had hurt him. "Today the market is three dollars a box — I'm breaking even. Next week I could be going

backward.” He laughed at his own helplessness. And even a grower with a small holding, like Barling, is far better off than a man trying to subsist on a family farm. Two-thirds of California’s farms are of less than a hundred acres, and even without the pressure of a strike the family farms are going under; California has lost fifty-three thousand farms—nearly half—in the last decade. Since 1960, more than a quarter of America’s family farms have vanished, but it is the family that vanishes, not the farm; farm land, absorbed by the large growers, has decreased only about four percent in the same period. The small farm, with small capital and small margin, can afford neither the labor force nor the new machinery that keep increasing the advantage of the large ones. Rarely do the small farms cooperate in their production and distribution operations, or join forces to support the price of their smaller crop. Huge corporate enterprises, which can make money on a small profit from an enormous volume, are actually far more of a threat to Barling than Chavez’s union.

We stood around awhile, waiting for the pickets. Before long, Barling said, “Here they come now.” A caravan of ancient cars had appeared on the Sandrini Road. They drew off the pavement, and fifteen or twenty people got out, stretching. Carrying horns and “HUELGA!” banners, the pickets split into two groups, stationing themselves opposite two min crews of pickets.

“Well, this is a pretty good-looking group,” Barling said, starting across the highway. “Sometimes we get a lot of these guys with long hair and beards.” He grinned bitterly through his own early-morning stubble. “Course, we know they’re actual grape pickers, not just a bunch of hippies from L.A.,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong.” For the first time, and the last, we laughed together. He crossed the public road. Arms folded on his chest, legs wide apart, he took up a position where his workers could get a good look at the boss.

Up and down the road, red strike flags fluttered, the only brightness in the sunny haze that stretched away to the brown shadows of the Tehachapi Mountains. Already the voices of the pickets were calling to the workers.

*“Venega! Venegase! Companero!”*

*“Huelga! Huel-ga!”*

To Chavez, the picket line is the best school for organizers. “If a man comes out of the field and goes on the picket line, even for one day, that man will never be the same,” he once told me. “The picket line is the best possible education. Some labor people came to Delano and said, ‘Where do you train people? Where are your classrooms?’ I took them to the picket line. That’s where we train people. That’s the best training. The labor people didn’t get it. They stayed a week and went back to their big jobs and comfortable homes. They hadn’t seen training, but the people here see it, and I see it. The picket line is where a man makes his commitment. And the longer he’s on the picket line the stronger the commitment. The workers on the ranch committees who don’t know how to speak, or never speak—after five days on the picket lines they speak right out, and they speak better. A lot of workers make their commitment when nobody sees them — they just leave the job and they don’t come back. But you get a guy who, in front of the boss and in front of all the other guys, throws down his tools and marches right out to the picket line—that’s an exceptional guy, that guy, but that’s the kind we have out on the strike. Oh, the picket



line is a beautiful thing, because it does something to a human being. People associate strikes with violence, and we've removed the violence. Then people began to understand what we are doing, you know, and after that they're not afraid. And if you're not afraid of that kind of thing, then you're not afraid of guns — these things can't frighten you. If you had a gun and they had a gun, then you would be frightened, because it becomes a question of who gets shot first. But if you have no gun and they've got a gun, then—well, the guy with the gun has a lot harder decision to make than you have.”

In the first months of the strike, in the autumn of 1965, local sheriffs and the state police of Kern and Tulare Counties followed the strikers everywhere they went. At that time, many of the ranch foremen carried guns, and shotgun blasts destroyed picket signs and car windows. The growers, startled by a walkout of several hundred harvest workers in the first few days, apparently meant to see to it that this strike was broken as quickly as all the rest, and they set about their business with a will. With policemen watching, they marched up and down the picket lines slamming the strikers with their elbows, kicking them, stomping their cowboy boots down on strikers' toes; they cursed them, spat on them, and brushed them narrowly with speeding trucks. On September 23, 1965, while picketing the house of a scab-labor contractor in Delano, a small striker named Israel Garza was knocked down repeatedly by a grower before the police intervened; they had been warned by Chavez that he could not control the crowd if the attacks continued. The police reported to the Fresno *Bee* that they had dispersed the crowd “when one picket fell down.” The strikers accepted this treatment, in the expectation that arrests would soon be made, but those arrested were invariably strikers, who were taken into custody for such offenses as shouting, the public use of bullhorns, the public use of the word “*huelga*,” and, in one case, the public reading of Jack London's “Definition of a Strikebreaker.”

Of all the tactics of harassment, the threatening use of trucks was the most dangerous, but repeated complaints got nothing more from the police than the statement that no crime had been committed. At one point, a Filipino union member named Alfonso Pereira, who said that he had lost faith in the non-violent philosophy, announced that he was old and despondent and wanted to trade his life for that of a grower. He got into his car, drove around a field to pick up speed, and then launched himself into a trio of growers by the roadside. All but one jumped clear; the victim, John Zaninovich, got away with a broken hip. Pereira was dealt with swiftly by the courts, and went off to spend a year in jail, apparently with no regrets.

A few months later, a striker was run down. The complaint charged:

On or about Oct. 15, 1966, at the packing shed located at Garces Highway and Glenwood St. in the City of Delano, County of Kern, State of California, at or about the hour of 10 a.m. of said day, defendant Lowell Jordan Schy, acting within the course and scope of his employment, did maliciously, deliberately, and willful assault and batter plaintiff by driving a flatbed truck, California license number W49-554, over plaintiff's body.

The plaintiff, Manuel Rivera, who had been one of the first workers to walk off the job and join the strike in 1965, was permanently crippled, and very nearly lost his life. The man

who crippled him was not a trucker but the sales manager of a large grower; he had got angry when the drivers refused to cross the picket line, and decided to drive a truck himself. But, having run down Rivera, he rolled up the windows of the truck cab and subsided into a funk. If the episode had taken place out in the vineyards instead of in town, Schy would almost certainly have been killed. Had Chavez not arrived very quickly, he might have been killed anyway, because the truck was coming down around his cars when Chavez got there. Chavez had left the scene a few minutes before the accident; Helen Chavez phoned him at the office, and he came rushing back. Schy was actually calling for Chavez to come and save him, but Chavez could not reach the truck door through the angry crowd. Finally, he crawled under the truck bed and surfaced at the running board of the cab, where he rose like a vision before the mob. But the people were cursing non-violence; they wanted blood, and Chavez was in their way. Chavez yelled that they would have to get him too, then, and at last the people in front calmed down enough to listen, and he brought them back under control. He escorted Schy to the packing-shed offices, where he confronted the owner, a man named Mosesian. "That was the maddest I ever got," Chavez told me. "I really let him have it. I told him, 'You people value your damned money more than you value human life.'" Mosesian said he was sorry about what had happened, but subsequently a citation was issued against Manuel Rivera, for obstructing traffic. An assault case against Schy is still pending, and Rivera has received no compensation.

The mood of that time has been described by the Reverend James Drake, Chavez's administrative assistant: "Everybody thought Rivera was going to die, so everybody wanted to get the cops, who had been practically goose-stepping up to the picket line with their clubs, and they wanted to get the driver. One of the strikers, carrying a gun, walked up to Cesar and said, 'Goodbye. It's been nice knowing you.' He said how enjoyable it had been working with Cesar and the union. So Cesar said, 'Where are you going?' and the man said, 'Let's take a little walk.' Anyway, in a situation like that you forget your philosophy. I've been on the picket line ten different times when I didn't even know myself—you just see red and you have to do something."

I had followed Barling out onto the public road, and he pointed out two Labor Department officials and a heavy man in a white shirt who was leaning against a pale-blue car, arms folded. This was Joseph Brosmer, of the Agricultural Labor Bureau — an organization set up, in effect, to protect the growers by keeping them from getting "overly excited," as Barling put it. "Some of your growers lose their tempers fairly easy, particularly if they are picked on or aggravated at, or so on and so forth," Barling said. He introduced me to Brosmer, who, upon discovering that I had a journalistic interest in the strike asked me if I was aware of the fact that a worker who had been employed only one second could walk off the job and give his name to the gentlemen over there—he pointed to the Department of Labor people — in order to certify a labor dispute. "This situation tends to lend itself pretty well to plants," he said.

Approaching the strikers, I was stopped by the picket captain, a husky blond man with glasses. He had seen me talking with the growers, and he asked for identification. "I want

to know if you're friend or enemy," he said. I told him that on a public road I was under no obligation to identify myself. "I'm asking anyway," he said, neither rudely, or politely, and I obliged him, because if he could not stop me from asking questions, he could stop me from getting answers. This picket captain was Nick Jones, a member of the staff of the Migrant Ministry, a Protestant group that attends to the needs of migrants in many states and, in Jones's opinion does a poor job of it everywhere but in California. A sign that read "no Trespassing: Survivors Will Be Prosecuted" attracted Jones's attention, and he went over to an old Volkswagen and got out an old camera to record it. In the foreground of his picture he placed a stout Mexican woman striker with a bullhorn, whom he addressed as Mrs. Zapata. She wore a big, cone-peaked straw sombrero with a pink brim, which was festooned with Kennedy buttons, an A.F.L.-C.I.O. badge, a "Grapes of Wrath—Delano" button, a small portrait of Jesus, and a purple feather. In the long rise and fall of loudspeaker rhetoric, she talked non-stop most of the morning. She told the workers that they should not be afraid of the *patron*, that they, the strikers had known hunger, too, and were seeking to better the lot of the poor, that all workers must organize and fight so that their children would not have to work like animals, as they had. "*Venganse, senores!*" she bawled. "*Para su respeto ye dignidad!*" Her entreaties were carried to the workers on wages of "*Huelga! Huelga!*" from the picket line, and the workers glanced at her uneasily and kept working. Now and then, Mrs. Zapata was drowned out by a passing truck, which would blare its horn from half a mile away and continue blaring after it had passed, its dust cloud rolling off into the fields. These trucks were driven at high speed, skimming the road edge just behind the strikers. Once, I had to jump, and each time I was shaken by the passing blast of air. Then the strike cries would resume again: "*Huelga!*"

Since many of the first-line strikers were now working on the boycott in the Eastern cities, what was left was a sort of skeleton crew. The men pickets that morning were mostly aged Filipinos, the women mostly Mexicans who were out of work. One pretty woman told me that she had been knocked unconscious by nitrate fertilizer spray while she was working in the Coachella Valley a few weeks before. She was a green-carder from Mexico City, Magdalena by name and beautician by trade, who had come to make some quick money during harvest time. She was gaily attired in a green shirt with huge white polka dots, a yellow bandanna, lavender slacks, and fake red hair, all set off by a small silver Virgin on a chain, and she was extremely cheerful about her ailments, which included nosebleeds, headaches, and sore lungs. It still pained her to breathe, she told me, and she could not go near the smell of sprays without a recurrence of her symptoms.

"*Huelga!*" the pickets shouted. "*Venganse! No tengan miedo del patron, señores! Venganse!*" The old Filipino men beckoned with their arms, or waved red banners back and forth like fans. When they saw a countryman among the work crews, they would switch from poor Spanish and English and cry out to him in their native Tagalog: "*Mag labas kayo, kabayan! Huelga!*"

Jones told me that he was optimistic about the progress of the strike. The Johnston ranch had been struck yesterday; no workers had walked off the job during the picketing, but a whole group had come in to the farm workers' office afterward. "If we get the base here, we can start sweeping, take a lot of ranches further north," he said. "Those guys

aren't goin gto make us boycott, because that hurts them worse than the strike itself. Much as they dislike Cesar, they'll sit down and negotiate."

"*Esquiroll!*" a woman shouted at the workers. "*Esquiroll!*"

I asked her what the word meant, and she said it was a term used for scabs. "*Es un animal.*" She laughed, making an ambiguous writhing motion with her hand. "*Ni aqui ni alla.*"

"Man, they don't like Cesar," Jones went on. "And behind the dislike for Cesar is the whole Mexican thing — someone they called 'boy' is standing up and asking to negotiate."

Chavez himself has given a good, deal of thought to the growers' feelings about race. "Let them have their pride," he once told me. "What we want is the contract. This is what they fail to understand. We are not out to put them out of business, because our people need the work. We are out to build a union, and we'll negotiate half of our lives to get it. If we can get better wages and conditions for the workers, we are willing to give up something. But they choose to make it a personal fight, so we have to do something to save their face. It's not hard to understand why they feel the way they do, because they've had their own way for so long that they've got the habit of it. So things can't look as if we are getting a victory and they are not."

The perfunctory yells and catcalls on the picket line gained sudden momentum; red flags danced as the pickets gathered in a single spot, like a flock of birds. Down a row of vines, perhaps fifty yards away, a work crew had run out of boxes, and while they waited for a truck they turned toward the picket line and sat down to listen. The strikers' big gun, Mrs. Zapata, was moved into position, and while she huffed and blew into her bullhorn a Filipino shouted at the work crew in an old, hoarse voice that could scarcely be heard. Most Mexicans in the vineyards do not speak English, and this man's Spanish was not up to the job. "*Ven! Come on! Leesten, you!*" He wore a red "HUELGA" kerchief tied into the band of a plastic straw hat, and a purple button that said, "Don't Buy Scab Grapes."

"*Para respeto, hombre!*" Jones yelled. "come on!"

The workers appeared to be arguing among themselves. Then one boy stood up and started for the picket line. After a few steps, he retreated, to argue some more. A second time he started down the road, motioning over his shoulder for his friends to follow. Though several got to their feet, they did not move. When the boy reached a point perhaps ten yards from the property line, he looked back and saw that he was all alone. He was no more than eighteen, and very small and thin, with a red-and-white kerchief tied around a homely narrow head. He stared at the dancing banners of the picket line—"Vengase! Venga!"—and at his boss, Barling, and at Joseph Brosmer, and at the two federal officials. He glanced back again at the *campesinos* he had left. Then he sank slowly to one knee and picked at the earth. He forced a smile, to suggest that he was only playing a game. He glanced back again to where he had come from.

"*Venga! Vengase! Nosotros tambien tenemos hambre!*"

The boy with the red-and-white kerchief waved a thin, ragged arm at the workers he had left behind. No one was working now; the boy's crew had been joined by others. But after a s while the other crews dispersed and went back to work. Soon the long row was

almost empty, stretching away southward into the dusty sky. The boy got up. He hesitated, then he spun away, cringing in a howl of disappointment that went up from the pickets. Shoulders hunched, he hurried down the row. Staring at the ground, kicking at clods, he lifted both hands high into the sky, thumbs outward, and without turning, waggled a goodbye with his fingers to the picket line.

The picket line subsided in discouragement; the boy had dissipated any pressure that might have been built up, and the morning was a failure. Mrs. Zapata moved a few rows away, where, using the bullhorn, she burst into song. “Nosotros Venceremos” (“We Shall Overcome”) was followed promptly by “Huelga General!” (“General Strike”):

*Viva la huelga en el “jil”!*

*Viva la cause y la historia!*

*La raza llena de Gloria!*

*La Victoria va cumplir!*

A big woman came to the edge of the fields and shouted violently at Mrs. Zapata. Through the bullhorn, Mrs. Zapata notified the workers that she knew this broad only too well and that she was entirely untrustworthy; in fact, she owed fifteen dollars to Mrs. Zapata herself, which she refused to pay. The woman, calling Mrs. Zapata a bitch, shrieked out an invitation to cross the property line, at which time she would be paid in full. In response, without letting up on the bullhorn, Mrs. Zapata saluted the woman with lone finger. (To cross the property line, as the workers knew, was to get arrested.) Laughing, the picket line disbanded. The strikers got into their old cars and drove away.

When I re-crossed the road, Barling said, “That Mexican gal with the bullhorn is terrific. She’s better than all the rest of their people put together.” He seemed more tense than ever. Barling and Brosmer had been joined by a young grower named Dan Surber, of Caratan Farms. “Him and I have some grapes together, too,” Barling said.

“Them geese are making one-forty an hour fertilizing that pond,” Surber said, pointing at some white geese in a farm pond behind his truck, “and they’re goin’ on strike.”

Brosmer laughed.

Barling had promised to let me go into the fields and talk with his workers once the pickets were gone, and when I reminded him of his promise he looked unhappily at Brosmer.

“I think that would be useless, Butch,” Brosmer said. “I think it would be better to wait until you finish your day.” To me, Brosmer said, “People have a natural-born curiosity, and you may only talk to two, but every goddamn one of ‘em is going to stop working to watch. It’s just human nature.” Barling nodded, in discomfort. He did not look me in the eye. Brosmer continued, “I think I’d have to agree with Butch that you’d better hold off going in there until Butch finishes his working day.”

Apologetically, Barling said that after work he would take me in and let me pick out any worker I wanted to talk with, and I asked him why, now that the strikers were gone, it would not be all right for me to walk into the fields by myself.

“I guess we’re not communicating,” Brosmer said before Barling could speak. “You would be a disruptive factor.”

But Barling said, "That would probably be all right. Just so long as I don't get disrupted."

"No," Brosmer said. "I think you're making a mistake."

"Well, let's go, then," Barling said ambiguously, looking at no one. He set his jaw and started for his truck, and I went with him and got into it.

"You're making a big mistake!" Brosmer called after him.

We drove down a side road into the fields. It was nearly noon, and the truck raised big, evil clouds of hydrocarbon dust. Barling swung off into a service lane that crossed the rows of vines, and stalled the truck at the edge of a crew of workers. "I ain't *never* goin' to get this crop out of here if the damn people don't leave me alone," he said. His voice was tight and his face red.

Down the rows, I spotted a red-and-white kerchief on a head that sank down behind the leaves. I waited a little while, and then I asked Barling if I could talk with the worker of my choice. Sure, he said. Which, one? If he didn't mind, I said, I'd like to operate alone—it might be more spontaneous. He grunted and let me go. But the big woman who had shouted at Mrs. Zapata saw where I was going. *That* young kid?" she called. "There weren't any boxes, and he said, 'I'm going to have some fun with them while I'm waiting.' That's why he walked out there and sat down."

The boy was deep under the vines, which were no higher than my chest. In the shadows, the filtered sun gave the big bunches of green grapes a soft glow. Crouched there, he stared up at me. He did not speak English.

"*Buenos días!*" I said.

He did not so much answer the greeting as repeat it, in a hushed voice full of fear.

In bad Spanish, I told him please not to be afraid, and then asked why he had gone back.

I had expected a few frightened murmurs, but he spoke right out, in passion and pain. He was a green-carder on vacation from an insurance job in Mexico, and he could speak frankly because in harvest time no one was fired. His voice grew louder. Besides, as an insurance man he would be here only two weeks more before his vacation ended. The insurance man poked his head out of the vines and looked up and down the row before continuing in a lower voice. Si, he was in favor of a union. "The ranchers have no concern for us. Everybody should have a union.

Persisting, I repeated my question: Why had he not walked out an hour before?

The boy picked at the dust on his sandals. "The whole world was awaiting me," he murmured, "and I became afraid."

The walls at the headquarters of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, in Delano, California, are decorated with photographs of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi; beside them is a blood-red poster of Emiliano Zapata, complete with mustachio, cartridge belts, carbine, sash, sword, an giant sombrero, under the exhortation "*Viva la Revolucion.*" All three, in their different ways, are heroes of U.F.W.O.C.'s director, Cesar Chavez. There are also portraits of John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, black-bordered and hung with flowers, as in a shrine. Here and there is the emblem of U.F.W.O.C., a square-edged black eagle in a white circle on a red background, over the word

“HUELGA,” which in Spanish means “strike.” According to one legend, the eagle appeared in a dream to Chavez; according to another the inspiration came to Chavez’s cousin Manuel from the label on a bottle of Gallo Thunderbird wine. The truth is that after Cesar Chavez settled on an Aztec eagle as an appropriate symbol for the union, Manuel sketched one on a piece of brown wrapping paper with the help of Cesar’s brother Richard. They then squared off the wing edges so that the eagle would be easier for union members to draw on the handmade flags that are now a familiar sight on picket lines near vineyards in the San Joaquin Valley and elsewhere in California, where for nearly four years U.F.W.O.C. has been conducting a strike to win union contracts for the grape workers.

I was shown around the offices and introduced to members of the staff one morning by LeRoy Chatfield, one of Chavez’s assistants. Before joining the union movement, three and a half years ago, Chatfield, a man in his early thirties with the white hair of a blond child in summer and a wide-eyed, boy face, had been known as Brother Gilbert, of the Christian Brothers. He had been a teacher at Garces High School, in Bakersfield, but it was Cesar Chavez, he told me, who had given him his education. Chatfield introduced me to two staff lawyer, Jerry Cohen and David Averbuck; to the Reverend James Drake, a young Protestant clergyman who has been working with Chavez since 1962; to Philip Vera-Cruz, a Filipino vice-president of the union; and to Chavez’s wife, Helen, who runs U.F.W.O.C.’s credit union. Mrs. Chavez speaks very softly, but Chatfield told me later that she has a hot temper, which has been known to erupt on rare occasions. “Sometimes she has less faith than Cesar in non-violence,” Chatfield said.

Manuel and Richard Chavez were on the point of setting off for New York by car to try and gain support for a boycott of California grapes, which seemed to be faltering. Large quantities of Thompson seedless grapes had been arriving in New York in boxes marked “Hi-Color,” a label belonging to a subsidiary of the DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation, with which Chavez had signed a contract, and which was therefore exempt from the boycott. According to Manuel Chavez, DiGiorgio had not been harvesting table grapes in recent months, and workers had reported seeing “Hi-Color” boxes in the vineyards of non-union growers. “I am going over to New York,” Manuel Chavez said. “How far is it?” His face had been serious, but suddenly he laughed.

One of the union’s vice-presidents is Dolores Huerta, a very pretty, sad-eyed young woman who does not look like the mother of seven children but is. Mrs. Huerta told me that she met Chavez through a man named Fred Ross. Ross had been active in behalf of the migrant Okies during the Depression, had taken up the problems of displaced Japanese and Nisei during the war, and was working to help Mexican-Americans by setting up branches of a private agency called the Community Service Organization when Chavez and Mrs. Huerta came under his influence. In 1955, when Mrs. Huerta first met Chavez, she was an active member of the Stockton chapter of the C.S.O. “I had heard a lot about him from Fred Ross—Cesar this and Cesar that—but I didn’t really get a chance to talk to him, and he didn’t make much of an impression on me,” she said. “I forgot his face. I knew he was a great organizer, but he never showed it. It came out in the reports. He was very

unassuming, you see—did a lot of work but never took any leadership role. The first time I really heard him speak was at a board meeting in Stockton in 1957. He had to respond to sharp questions from an attorney, and I was very impressed by the way he handled it. You couldn't tell by looking at him what he could do. You had to see him in action to appreciate him. In 1958, they made him organizing director of the whole C.S.O., but even then he wasn't the forceful leader that he is now." Mrs. Huerta paused, and laughed. "Of course, everywhere he worked tremendous things happened," she said. "Those things didn't just happen by themselves. The rank and file began to see Cesar as the real head of the organization long before the leadership did."

For a year and a half, between August, 1958, and November, 1959, Chavez worked at organizing the farm workers at Oxnard against the inequities of the so-called *bracero* program, which he believed was being abused for the growers' benefit by both the Farm Placement Service of the California Department of Employment and the Bureau of Employment Security of the United States Department of Labor. The program had been set up during the Second World War, when there was a scarcity of farm laborers, to bring Mexican *braceros*, or field hands, into this country on a temporary basis. Even in the late nineteen-fifties, Chavez found that American laborers supposedly assigned to jobs by the F.P.S. still had trouble getting work when any *braceros* were available. According to law, the American workers should have been given first choice. Chavez documented hundreds of cases of illegal job discrimination by taking groups of unemployed workers to fill out employers' work cards day after day and keeping a record of the results. Then he staged sit-ins—his men went out and stationed themselves opposite the *braceros* who had taken their jobs—and protest marches, at the end of which the cards were burned in a gesture of contempt for the corruption of the hiring practices. Reporters were invited to the fires. These maneuvers anticipated tactics that Chavez would refine in his own union, and they worked. Because of all the publicity, American workers began getting more jobs. There are some eighteen hundred workers around Oxnard who were loyal to Chavez, and they held firm when he demanded better wages and working conditions. The growers met his terms, though not officially. Without giving their names, they would call up and ask him to send so many workers to be picked up by a truck near a certain church. Chavez wanted very much to get a union shop, but his C.S.O. job did not give him authority to negotiate an actual contract, and he watched in despair as the Packinghouse union of the C.I.O. took over what he had begun to build. Under routine trade-union direction, the organization soon disintegrated.

In the aftermath of Chavez's experience at Oxnard, I was told, he offered a year's service without salary to the C.S.O. if it would support a new union of farm workers. At a C.S.O. convention in Calexico in March of 1962, the board voted down Chavez's plan. At that point, Chavez stood up and said simply, "I resign." Immediately, people started arguing with one another, as if he weren't there. Chavez *couldn't* resign, they decided. But he had, and that evening, when he and Dolores Huerta and Fred Ross went across the border to Mexicali to get something to eat, they were all very depressed. According to Mrs. Huerta, Chavez was heartbroken.



Chavez was immediately offered a well-paid job as an organizer for the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, a farm workers' union that had been set up by the A.F.L.-C.I.O. in Stockton during his own successful organization of the workers in Oxnard, but at the time he wanted no part of traditional trade-union methods, and he turned it down. He spent two weeks finishing up his work for the C.S.O. and on March 31st, his thirty-fifth birthday, he drove off with his wife and his children—he had eight—to Carpinteria Beach, southeast of Santa Barbara, and not far from where he had picked tomatoes for several seasons during his own time as a migrant worker. This was the last vacation he has ever had time or money enough to take. After six days on the coast, Chavez had made up his mind how and where he would begin his own organization drive for farm workers, and the Chavezes went straight to Delano, where his wife's family lived and where his brother Richard had been head of the local C.S.O. chapter. Chavez himself had first worked in Delano's vineyards and cotton fields in 1937, when he was ten. He has said that he chose Delano because he knew that hard times were ahead and his family would not starve there, but another good reason for choosing Delano was the composition of the work force. There are seventy-odd grape ranches in the Delano area, with an estimated thirty-eight thousand acres of table grape vineyards, and grapes, unlike most crops, require tending of one kind or another — pruning, tying, thinning, girding, leafing, cultivating, spraying, and so forth—for almost nine months of the year. Because of the long work season, the farm workers of Delano are less transient than most, and many stay the year round — a situation that makes organizing them both simpler and more effective. The growers are doubtless right in their contention that Delano's grape workers, who average twenty-four hundred dollars a year, are the best-paid farm workers in California, but, in Chavez's opinion, the most desperately poor are not necessarily those most inclined to take action; unlike people who have glimpsed a spark of hope, the destitute are often too defeated to revolt.

In Delano, Mrs. Chavez got a job picking grapes at the DiGiorgio Corporation's huge Sierra Vista Ranch and Chavez took a three-day trip to “absorb” the Valley, from Marysville south of the Tehachapi Mountains, crisscrossing the flat countryside on long, straight roads. Then he returned to Delano and got a job picking peas—the first of a series of part-time jobs that helped to support the beginnings of his organization, which was called the National Farm Workers Association.

At first, Richard Chavez did not appreciate what his brother was trying to do. Richard was earning his living as a carpenter, and had small interest in a farm workers' union. As for Manuel, he was working at that time in San Diego, making good money as a car salesman; when Cesar asked him to join the new association, he flatly refused. “We aren't farm workers anymore,” he said. “We got away.” But Cesar argued that because the Chavezes had got away didn't mean they could abandon all the others. Finally, Manuel agreed to join up for one month. He has never left.

Apart from Mrs. Chavez, the only person who was enthusiastic from the start of what is now known as *La Causa* was Mrs. Huerta. When Chavez left the C.S.O., she told him she

would be honored to work for him—the verb is hers—and a few months later she quit her job as a lobbyist for the C.S.O. at the state capitol in Sacramento and moved to Delano. Not long after Chavez started to work in Delano, the Reverend Chris Hartmire, the state director of the Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches, who had worked with Chavez in Oxnard, assigned James Drake to Delano. Drake had just arrived in California, and this was his first mission. Like Mrs. Huerta, he was not overwhelmed by his first encounter with Chavez. “Cesar was very quiet,” he told me. “He just mentioned that he had quit his job to start organizing farm workers around Delano. I was expecting to do the same thing, more or less. I was assigned to spend six weeks in Delano, and I’m still here.”

When Chavez first got to Delano, the cheapest rental he could find was a house on Kensington Street, a block north of the one he lives in today. He had a small garage that he used as a headquarters, and it was so hot in there. Drake recalls, that all the ink melted down in a mimeograph machine the Migrant Ministry had lent him. “Everything was so oppressive that first summer that everything he wanted to do just seemed impossible,” Drake told me. “He had so many kids, and they had almost nothing to eat, and they had an old 1953 Mercury station wagon that burned much too much gas and oil—it belonged in a museum even then. So I really thought this guy was nuts. Everybody thought so except Helen—even Helen’s family. I had a car and a credit card, but I couldn’t really help much besides that. They had no money, but whatever they had they shared. I’d bring a lunch with me, but it was very important to them that I eat with them, and they were so gracious that I finally gave in. What impressed us most at the Migrant Ministry was that even though Cesar was very hard up for financing, he didn’t want *our money*. He made it clear right from the start that whatever organization he got going would be entirely independent; he didn’t want any Teamster money or any money from the A.F.L.-C.I.O. or any other money that might compromise him.”

“Cesar had studied the structure of the C.S.O.,” Mrs. Huerta said, “and he tried to correct its mistakes in his organization. Mainly, he wanted the people who did the work to make the decisions. Mainly, he wanted the people who did the work to make the decisions. He wanted the workers to share, to participate, and he still does, because without that the union has no real strength. This is why he would never accept outside money—not, at least, until the strike began. He wanted the workers to see that they could pay for their own union.” Very early in his struggle, Chavez turned down a private grant of fifty thousand dollars, offered without conditions, because he felt that the gift would put pressure on him to obtain immediate results. “Manuel and I almost quit,” Richard Chavez told me.

In that first year, after Chavez had spent his own savings, amounting to twelve hundred dollars, he sometimes found himself asking people for food. This was hard on his pride, as he admits, but he came to believe that the union got some of its best members as a result of this begging. He has frequently said, “The people who give you their food give you their hearts.”

Chavez got up early every morning and worked until midnight, taking a survey up and down the Valley to find out what farm workers really wanted. With his youngest child, Anthony, who was then four, he went from door to door and out into the fields, distributing eighty thousand cards on which the workers were invited to set down how much they thought they should be earning. At that time, the average wage was ninety cents an hour, and it is a measure of their morale that most of the workers said that they deserved a dollar-ten, or perhaps a dollar twenty-five. Occasionally, a man would say that he deserved a dollar-fifty, or even a dollar seventy-five, and a few might scrawl on their card a note of encouragement or hope. These people Chavez visited in person, and many became the first members of his association.

“His consistency and perseverance really struck me,” Drake told me. “A disability case, a worker injured on the job—he would stay with that worker day and night, day and night, until he could locate an attorney who would take the case for nothing, or find some way of settling it that was of benefit to the worker. That’s how his union was built—on plain hard work and these very personal relationships. It was a slow, careful, plodding thing. The growers didn’t even know he was in town. Even when the strike started, they had no idea who Cesar Chavez was. But the workers did. Day and night, they came to his house, because his office was his house. He just built up this very basic trust. He ran a series of house meetings and never talked about forming a union—just an association of concerned people—because there had been unions and unions and strikes and strikes, and every one of them had failed. He learned out of a government manual how to keep books, and he set up a credit union. He talked about cooperatives and everything, but he never used the word ‘union’ until 1965, when the strike began.”

One of the early members was a man named Manuel Rivera. Rivera came to Chavez in 1963 with the complaint that his labor contractor not only had refused to tell him what his hourly wage was for work already done but, when he protested, had kicked him out of the truck and let him walk back to town; the police had shown no interest in his case. Chavez learned Rivera’s old car had broken down for good, and that the Rivera family had spent three days at the bus station in Delano. The Chavezes took the whole family into their own small house and lent Rivera an old Volvo. When Rivera had saved a little money and was ready to move on, he said, “How much do I owe you?” and Chavez answered the he didn’t owe anything; he owed help to other farm workers. After returning Chavez’s old car all polished up, Rivera left Delano, and Chavez soon forgot about him. Six months later, Rivera showed up again. Over Chavez’s protest, he paid union dues for all the months since Chavez had taken him in, and on the job spoke so fervently of Chavez to other workers that he eventually brought in more than a hundred new members. (In 1966, Rivera was run down and permanently crippled by a flatbed truck belonging to a grower whose fields were being picketed.)

The organizing work has always gone slowly, and it was especially difficult at first. Manuel Chavez still has his 1963 N.F.W.A. card. On it, along with a green eagle, is printed “Delano Local Number 2. Cesar Chavez, General Director. Manuel Chavez, Secretary-

Treasurer.” Manuel laughed as he showed it to me. “I guess Cesar was one local and I was the other. We were the membership, too. It’s a good thing Richard was still a carpenter—he was kind of supporting us.” In this dark period, Chavez, who was penniless, turned down a job, at twenty-one thousand dollars a year, as director of the Peace Corps in a four-country region of South America.

Chavez held on, and by August 1964, his association had a thousand members. A number of these new members, including Julio Hernandez, who is now a union officer, came from the town of Corcoran, about twenty-five miles northwest of Delano. It was in Corcoran, on October 4, 1933, that five thousand cotton pickers, many of them Mexicans, began a strike that spread up and down the cotton fields of the San Joaquin Valley, and eventually involved eighteen thousand workers. As was customary in the Depression, wages had been drastically pushed down by advertising for many more workers than could be used, then letting starving men with starving families underbid each other for jobs, until the pay ran as low as fifteen cents an hour. When the cotton pickers struck, the growers armed themselves and, after evicting the strikers from their camps, followed them to a rally in Pixley, just north of Delano, where they opened fire on the crowd and killed two workers. A third worker was murdered the same day at Arvin, a town southeast of Delano, in Kern County. Eleven growers were arrested and eleven were acquitted. The strike, which lasted for twenty-four days, won a small wage increase for the workers, but the leaders of the union that ran the strike—the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, an unabashedly pro-Communist organization—were flogged, tarred and feathered, and finally jailed. At the time of the Corcoran strike, an assistant sheriff was quoted as saying, “We protect our farmers here in Kern County. They are our best people. They are always with us. They keep the country going. They put us in here and they can put us out again, so we serve them. But the Mexicans are trash. They have no standard of living. We herd them like pigs.” Like the signs of Chavez’s childhood that read “NO DOGS OR MEXICANS ALLOWED,” remarks of this sort are considered poor public relations these days, but the underlying attitude I was told by members of Chavez’s union, is still very much alive.

After a new surge in membership, Mrs. Chavez left the fields to work full time at running the credit union, and Mrs. Huerta took over the bookkeeping and other responsibilities. At about this time, a man named Gilbert Padilla was assigned by the Migrant Ministry to work with Drake on the problem of improving conditions in labor camps run by the counties of Kern and Tulare for migrant workers. A large-scale rent strike organized in the Linnel and Woodville camps of Tulare County by Drake and Padilla and a lawyer named Gary Bellow finally closed them down and led to the construction of new camp buildings. “The county was making a big profit on those camps, which were just slums,” Drake told me. “When the workers found out about the profit, it wasn’t hard to organize a rent strike.” The workers Drake and Padilla had organized during their rent strike came into Chavez’s association in February, 1965, and in the summer of that year Padilla led them in a strike at the J.D. Martin Ranch, in Tulare County near Earlimart, and won a pay raise for the grape pickers there. This small victory lifted morale

in the new union, and that September what is now known as the California Grape strike began in earnest.

The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. farm workers' group Chavez decided not to go to work for in 1962, had made some small gains for its members—most of whom were Filipinos—but it got no further than the unions of the past in winning legal contracts and the right of collective bargaining. (Because of the failures of farm unions in the past and a general feeling that unions dominated by what are known as Anglos had actually worked with employers against the interests of Filipino and Mexican-American farm workers, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, like Chavez's National Farm Workers Association, avoided the word "union" in its title.) On September 16, 1965, the Mexican Independence Day, Chavez's N.F.W.A., which was made up mostly of Mexican-Americans, voted to support an A.W.O.C. strike for a wage increase which had started week before. Led by two Filipino organizers, Larry Itliong and Ben Gines, six to eight hundred A.W.O.C. workers had struck a number of Delano vineyards, including the huge holdings of the DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation; in supporting the A.W.O.C. strikers, Chavez's group voted to strike two other large growers—Schenley Industries, Inc., and Guimarra Vineyards, Inc. On September 20th, eleven hundred members of N.F.W.A. walked off the job.

Chavez, seeking funds and volunteers, spoke at a number of colleges, and appealed to CORE, and S.N.C.C. for people with experience in confrontations to act as picket captains until the farm workers could be trained. The response to Chavez's appeal was mixed. At public meetings, he would be asked when he had last paid dues to the Communist Party. Once, he was actually pelted with eggs and tomatoes, but he kept right on with his speech, and before he was through the booing had changed to wild applause. Besides S.N.C.C. and CORE people, a number of clergymen, of all faiths, came to man the picket lines, and there were also volunteers from other groups, such as Students for a Democratic Society and the W.E.B. DuBois Clubs, as well as an assortment of hippies of uneven quality, some of whom were less help than hindrance. Chavez eventually got rid of those who were becoming financial burdens, or sources of embarrassment because of their behavior. "He didn't act nearly as fast as the rest of us wanted," Chatfield told me. "He agonized about those kids for months. But when he did move—" Chatfield made a chopping motion with his hand. "*Man!* Like a knife!"

The strikers' main efforts in the early months were concentrated on Schenley Industries. The Schenley farm in Delano was such a small part of the company's operation that a defense against the boycott that was undertaken in late 1965 might scarcely have seemed worth the negative publicity Chavez's volunteers were trying to give the Schenley trade name all across the country. But the Schenley fight was costly for the farm workers. Hundreds of people already poor had sacrificed their jobs to strike and that first autumn exhausted the strike fund. Despite a good many misgivings in some quarters about Chavez and his allies, the labor movement began to provide some support for the strike. A workers' clinic was operated by a volunteer nurse, and out-of-town doctors gave free

service. (No local doctor ever volunteered.) In San Francisco, the Teamsters refused to cross the Schenley picket lines, and in mid-December Walter Reuther, of the United Automobile Workers, marched through the streets of Delano with Chavez and Larry Itliong and spoke out in defense of the Schenley boycott. “We’d rather not do negative things like boycotts,” he said, “but when the growers refuse to sit down at the bargaining table there is no alternative.” Reuther handed over a check for five thousand dollars, and pledged the same amount every month until the strike was over. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. was underwriting A.W.O.C. at ten thousand dollars a month, and collections had been taken up by the Garment Workers, Seafarers, Packinghouse Workers, and other A.F.L.-C.I.O. unions, as well as by church and student groups. But the combined sums did not pay for the strike, which was costing forty thousand dollars a month. The deficit was made up in hardship

By the middle of March, 1966, when the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory labor conducted hearings in California, the two organizations involved in the strike—N.F.W.A. and A.W.O.C.—had conducted by far the longest farm strike in California history, and seemed to be on the edge of total defeat. The chairman of the subcommittee was Harrison A. Williams Jr., a Democrat from New Jersey, who had been supporting the interests of farm workers in Congress since 1959—the year the subcommittee was established—and he was accompanied by Senator Robert Kennedy, of New York, and Senator George Murphy, a California Republican. Chavez addressed Chavez addressed Senator Williams’s subcommittee with his usual frankness. “Although we appreciate your efforts here, we do not believe that public hearings are the route to solving the problem of the farm worker,” he said. “In fact, I do not think that anyone should ever hold another hearing or make a special investigation of the farm-labor problem. Everything has been recorded too many times already, and the time is now past due for immediate action. Oh, some people say education will do it—write off this generation of parents and hope my son gets out of farm work. Well, I am not ready to be written off as a loss, and farm work could be a decent job for my son, with a union. But the point is that this generation of farm-labor children will not get an adequate education until their parents earn enough to care for the child the way they want to and the way the other children in school—the ones who succeed—are cared for . . . All we want from the government is the machinery—some rules of the game. All we need is the recognition of our right to full and equal coverage under every law which protects every other working man and woman in this country.” Chavez was referring to the fact that growers, unlike most other employers, are under no legal obligation to bargain with their employees, since farm workers have been specifically exempted from the terms of the National Labor Relations Act, and only a few farm workers have been affected by federal minimum-wage legislation. In the course of the hearings, Bishop Hugh A Donohue, of Stockton, expressed unanimous support for the strikers on the part of the eight Roman Catholic bishops of California and made an eloquent appeal for full collective bargaining rights for farm workers.

On March 17th, the day after the hearings, Chavez set off on a widely publicized workers’ march — or *peregrinacion*, as he called it — from Delano the steps of the capitol at

Sacramento. The *peregrinacion* was inspired in part by the freedom march from Selma, Alabama, but that had taken place a year before, but like a fast that Chavez undertook two years later, it had a religious connotation as well. Its emblem was the Mexican patron saint of the *campesinos*, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and the *peregrinacion* was to arrive at the capitol steps on Easter Sunday. Chavez had suggested that the march should be penitential, like the Lenten processions of Mexico — an atonement for past sins of violence on the part of the strikers, and a kind of prayer. But *La Causa* was supported by a number of Protestants, Jews, and non-believers, and some of them made it clear that they did not see the slightest reason for atonement on the workers' part—weren't the workers the victims? "The question was brought up at a special meeting," Mrs. Huerta told me. "We put the Virgin to a motion, and virginity won." Sixty-seven strikers set off on the three-hundred-mile march to Sacramento, where they hoped to meet with Governor Edmund G. Brown. The progress of the *peregrinacion* was slow and ceremonial; as Chavez had anticipated, it received a good deal of support and participation from people along the way, in the form of food and shelter for the marchers. More than fifty of the strikers, who came to be known as *los originales*, made the entire march from Delano to Sacramento, which lasted twenty-five days, and when they arrived on the capitol steps, in the rain, on Easter morning they were joined by thousands of supporters and some notable figures in politics and labor. Governor Brown had forsaken notables and *originales* alike in favor of a weekend in Palm Springs with Frank Sinatra, but the occasion did not lack a climax, for it was announced that Schenley had agreed to negotiate a contract. The contract, which was signed in June, 1966, provided an hourly wage of a dollar seventy-five and a union hiring hall. Except for some contracts the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union had won for pineapple workers in Hawaii, it was the first real contract for farm workers in the history of American labor.

The strikers now turned their attention to DiGiorgio, whose Sierra Vista Ranch occupied forty-four hundred acres near Delano, and began to establish a boycott of DiGiorgio's products. Suddenly the Teamsters union, which had provided important support for the strikers in the fight against Schenley, announced that it was prepared to represent the DiGiorgio workers, and the company quickly arranged an election in which workers could choose the Teamsters, Chavez's N.F.W.A., or no union at all. The election was held on June 24th, but Chavez told his people not to vote, and Governor Brown ordered an investigation by Ronald W. Haughton, of the American Arbitration Association, who recommended that a second election be held. There followed two tense months of accusations, violence, reprisals, injunctions, and arrests. Among those arrested was Chavez. Having persuaded ten workers to walk off the job at DiGiorgio's Borrego Springs property, northeast of San Diego, Chavez and two clergymen, one Protestant and one Catholic, accompanied them into the ranch to retrieve their belongings and were arrested for trespassing. All of them except the Catholic priest were then stripped naked and chained together by some zealous sheriff's deputies.

The Teamsters was the only union that had supported the retention of the *bracero* program, and, as Chavez saw the situation, the Teamsters had entered into an alliance with

DiGiorgio to work out what is known as a “sweetheart” contract—one that would almost certainly benefit the union and the employer but might or might not help the workers. Under these circumstances, Chavez concluded that he had no choice but to merge N.F.W.A. with A.W.O.C., under the banner of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. The merger took place in August, before the second election at DiGiorgio, and the last phase of the battle with the Teamsters was extremely vicious. The A.F.L.-C.I.O., which had expelled the Teamsters in 1957, charged the Teamsters were controlled by gangsters, and the Teamsters countered that the new organization, called the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, was influenced by an international Communist conspiracy. Prevented from picketing at the Sierra Vista Ranch, the strikers held nightly vigils outside the labor camps, at a shrine set up in the back of Chavez’s old Mercury station wagon; the workers, some of whom had been recruited by DiGiorgio from as far away as Juarez, Mexico, were proselytized when they came out to pray. The second election was held at Sierra Vista on August 30th, and anyone who had worked there for fifteen days or more during the previous year was eligible to vote. The Teamsters already had a large California membership of workers directly dependent on agriculture, which is a four-billion-dollar industry in the state, and the workers in the packing sheds voted 94 to 43 to join the Teamsters. But the field workers, some of whom had heard about the election in Mexico and had some back at their own expense, voted for U.F.W.O.C. by 530 to 331.

Nine days after the DiGiorgio election, the field workers walked out of the vineyards of A. Perelli-Minetti & Sons, demanding to be represented by U.F.W.O.C. But the company, which makes Tribuno wines, signed a contract with the Teamsters. After another inter-union struggle in the course of which a U.F.W.O.C. picket, John Shroyer, was beaten up, the Teamsters reversed their policy and came to terms with Chavez. Under a general agreement reached in July, 1967, U.F.W.O.C. gave the Teamsters representation of certain shed workers in return for representation of all field workers, including those at Perelli-Minetti, whose union contract was at once transferred to U.F.W.O.C. After these developments, Gallo, Almaden, Christian Brothers, and the other large California wineries presented very few difficulties for Chavez; the big wineries, which sell their products under their own nationally advertised brand names, would be especially vulnerable to a boycott, and by September of 1968, when the Paul Masson vineyard signed, almost all of them had contracts with U.F.W.O.C.

Meanwhile, the growers of table grapes, who are less vulnerable, continued to resist, and they were unquestionably heartened in November, 1966, when Ronald Reagan, who had spoken out against the grape strike from the start of his campaign, was elected governor. In that same month, U.F.W.O.C. won another representation election at the vineyards of Mosesian – Hourigan - Goldberg, a relatively small firm in Delano, by a vote of 285 to 38, but that was the last new representation election any table grape grower has permitted. In fact, there had not been much good news of any sort for the union in many months until a few days ago, when ten table-grape-growers in the Coachella Valley indicated that they would be willing to negotiate with Chavez.



Chavez eats no breakfast and is careless about lunch. He usually sits down to a modest meal in the evening. During the day, he drinks a great deal of Diet-Rite Cola, and he keeps a supply of dried apricots and prunes and a package of matzos in a drawer in his desk at U.F.W.O.C. headquarters in Delano. On the other hand, he is very fond of Chinese food, and I drove thirty miles with him one evening last summer to eat dinner at his favorite Chinese restaurant in Bakersfield. It was a family outing. Helen Chavez and four Chavez daughters went in one car, with a friend; Chavez and I were in a second car with the youngest daughter, Elizabeth, and the two young Chavez sons, Anthony and Paul. The only child missing was Fernando, nineteen, who was living with his Chavez grandparents in San Jose.

All eight of the Chavez children have nicknames. Elizabeth, who was then ten, had pronounced her own name as “Titibeth” when she was a baby, and it had stuck; Paul, eleven, who had been an especially rotund infant, started out as Bubble, and the name was later modified to Babo; and Anthony, who had just turned nine, was called Birdie, because of his supposed resemblance to a bird. “My own name was Manzi,” Chavez told me. “As a small child, I was supposed to have liked *manzanilla* — you know, camomile tea? So the family always called me Manzi.”

The memory made him smile. There is a single silver strand in the black Indian hair that falls across his forehead, and a black mole on the brown skin just below his lower lip seems to balance a gold tooth in his smile. He went on talking cheerfully about his childhood. His paternal grandfather had been a peon in Mexico, but had come to the United States with his family in 1889 and acquired, as a homesteader, about a hundred and sixty acres of sage and mesquite desert in the Gila River Valley some fifteen miles northeast of Yuma, Arizona. Chavez’s parents were both born in Mexico, but Cesar Estrada Chavez entered the world, on March 31, 1927, as a citizen of the United States. According to Chavez, his grandfather, another Cesar, greatly admired the big Mexican haciendas, and since he had nine sons and six daughters, some of whom had families of their own, he designed his house on the same scale. It lasted a half century, and might have lasted indefinitely in that dry climate if the roof had been of tile instead of adobe, because the walls were twenty-four inches thick. The house was cool in summer, warm in winter; it stood on a slope against the hills, with a laundry and a woodshed on one side and a garden on the other side. The farm produced cotton, lettuce, carrots, and watermelon, with maize, grain, and alfalfa for the animals, and it fed not only the Chavez families but many strangers who were wandering up and down the land in the Depression years. “At that time,” Chavez said, “my mother’s patron saint was St. Edwiges—I think she was a queen who gave everything to the poor — and my mother had made a pledge never to turn away anyone who came for food. And so, you know, ordinary people would come and have the food, and there were a lot of hoboes that used to come, at any time of day or night. Most of them were white. We lived in my aunt’s house in Yuma for a while, and my mother sent my brother Richard and me out into the street sometimes to look for *trampitas*—that was our affectionate way of calling the hoboes. I remember the first one. We found him sitting under a retaining wall, right around the corner, and we wanted this one bad, so we could quit looking and go play. But when we told him all about the free food just waiting for him

around the corner, that tramp couldn't believe it. "What for?" he said. 'What are you doing it for?' 'For nothing,' we said. 'You just come with us.' So we hustled him around the corner, and he ate the food, but he still didn't believe it. She'd just give them very simple things—beans and tortillas and hot coffee—but it was a meal, and soon all the hoboes knew about her, because word spreads. We didn't have much, and sometimes there was enough for everybody and sometimes there wasn't.

Manuel Chavez, who is first cousin to Cesar and Richard, came to the farm to live when he was small, and has been close to Cesar, ever since that the two men refer to each other as "my brother." For a while, this produced a certain amount of confusion in the union movement. The story goes that one time someone came to Cesar and begged him for enlightenment: Was Manuel his brother? In this period, Manuel's volatile nature was a constant threat to Cesar's program of non-violence, and Cesar considered the question a few seconds before he answered it. "Sometimes," he said.

The farm in the Gila River Valley represents a lost home to all three men. By 1937, Chavez's grandfather had died and the family's money was all gone; the farm was seized by the county to pay off the local taxes and the water bill. While they were working in the Imperial Valley last summer, Manuel and Richard drove to see the homestead, and reported to Cesar that they found only a ruin of fallen adobe on another man's farm. "I missed that house," Cesar told me. "When I was living there, we had all kinds of space—it seemed like the whole world belonged to us. In the cities, I couldn't get used to the fences. We couldn't play like we used to. On the farm, we had a little place where we played, and a tree in there was ours and we played there. We built bridges and we left everything there and when we came back the next day it was still there. You see, we never knew what stealing was, or to be stolen from. Another things that we learned after we left the farm—my dad especially—was that people would lie to you. Lie without batting an eye. For instance, they'd say, 'If you go to so-and-so place, they have a job for you, at a very high wage.' And we always went for it, hook, line, and sinker. They'd get you to go because you were competition. And we'd get there and we'd find there was no housing. The wages weren't what they'd said, and in many cases there wasn't even a job. I remember now that my dad and my mother had a heck of a time trying to understand why anyone would really—you know—just *lie*."

Chavez was quiet for a while. "We went to live in Brawley, and we used to shine shoes, and we really hustled. The cops wouldn't let us into Anglo Town, where the white people lived, but there was a diner right on the line, kind of, and everybody talked about how it was supposed to have beautiful hamburgers. It also had a sign reading 'WHITE TRADE ONLY,' but we had just come from the country, from Arizona, from a country, from a community that was mostly Mexican or whites too poor to bother about us. So we didn't understand yet, and we went in. The counter girl was up at the far end with her boy friend, and I said, "Two hamburgers, please!" Chavez shook his head. "The girl said, "What's the matter—you can't read? Goddamn dumb Mex!" She and her boy friend laughed, and we ran out. Richard was cursing them, but I was the one who had spoken them, and I was

crying. That laugh rang in my years for twenty years. It seemed to cut us out of the human race.”

With the loss of their land, the Chavez family became migrant farm workers. Up and down California they followed the crops, struggling for shelter, clothing, food. When the trek began, Manuel was twelve, Cesar ten, and Richard eight. Their childhood was already over. They worked with their parents, in the fields, picking prunes and figs and apricots, turning grapes for raisins, hunching and stooping down row upon row, from the Imperial Valley north to Marysville, and then south again in November, taking such poor, segregated schooling as they could find in the brief winter season between pruning and girdling. Chavez says that he attended more than thirty schools, without ever reaching high school. Although all members of the family were United States citizens, they were in constant peril of deportation: the Border Patrol, known as “*la migra*,” rarely concerned itself with the difference between Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. “My mother was so frightened of ‘*la migra*’ that she would be trembling whenever we were near the border,” Chavez said. Sometimes the family lived in tents or under bridges eking out a meager diet with fish and with greens culled from roadside ditches. “Mexicans like hogweed,” he said enigmatically. He and Richard saved tinfoil from old cigarette packs found on the highway; from the sale of an enormous ball weighing eighteen pounds, he remembers, they made enough to buy two sweatshirts and one pair of tennis shoes. In 1939, in San Jose, Cesar’s father joined a C.I.O. union that was organizing workers in the dried fruit industry; this union was broken, like all other farm workers’ unions, as soon as it went out on strike.

Chavez stopped talking to point out some freight cars on a railroad siding; in the twilight, I could just make out that the cars were heaped with sugar beets. “That is one crop I am glad is automated,” he said. That was work for an animal, not a man. Stooping and digging all day. And the beets are *heavy*. OH, that’s brutal work. And then to go home to some little place, with all those kids, and hot and dirty—that is how a man is crucified. *Crucified.*” He spoke with a low, intense burst of anger, gazing back at the cars of beets. “The growers don’t care about people, and they never will. Their improvements, their labor-saving devices are all for their own benefit, not for ours. But once we get union contracts, we’ll be protected. We’re not afraid of automation. We’ll split the profits of progress with them, fifty-fifty.”

At Bill Lee’s Bamboo Chopsticks, in Bakersfield, we all sat at one big table in a corner. The older girls announced that they wanted the combination shrimp plate, and there were jokes between Chavez and his children about shrimp strikes and hungry strikebreakers who might cross the picket line in the middle of the table. In the excitement, Chavez repeatedly confused the names of Sylvia and Linda, his very pretty older daughters, and at last Linda shouted, “He doesn’t know us apart!” Chavez shook his head ruefully; he gazed at her until she looked at him and smiled. But then he called Linda “Sylvia” again, and his wife hissed at him with real vehemence.

Mrs. Chavez, whose maiden name was Fabela, has fierce Spanish eyebrows. Her father was a colonel under Pancho Villa in the Revolution, and Chavez sometimes teases her

about her hot blood. They met in Delano during the Second World War when Chavez, then fifteen and still migrating, found himself stranded there, out of a job. She was working in a grocery store. She used to give me gas coupons, I think,” Chavez told the children. “Then she asked me to a show. How could I say no?”

Unwillingly, it seemed, Mrs. Chavez began to smile.

“Who paid?” Sylvia asked.

“She did, of course.” He laughed a little, smiling warmly at his wife. “She had a job and I did not—what could I do?”

“Were you a lover in your days?” Linda inquired.

“Love ‘em and leave ‘em, I bet,” another daughter said, and the shrimp eaters giggled as a group. The children were all salty and affectionate with their father without being impolite.

“Well, I was very friendly, you know. A lot of girls were my friends,, but I was not a lover.” Chavez said this simply, without coyness.

Chavez was called to the telephone while we were breaking open our fortune cookies, and we waited for him a little later in the street. There was a bookstore right across the street from the restaurant, and Mrs. Chavez said, “I hope it isn’t open—he’ll be in here all night.” She said that he was the same way about camera stores. Her shyness made me feel shy myself. At any rate, I had no wish to intrude upon her, and confined myself to the observation that I was supposed she would be very glad when the strike was over. Helen Chavez’s smile, when it appears, is a beautiful surprise. “Yes,” she said, paying no attention to the fatuity of my remark. Standing there on the sidewalk, considering life without the strike, she spoke the word with all her heart.

On the way home, Chavez reminisced about the two years he spent in the Navy, where he first became interested in photography. “I got in this poker game,” he said. “I think that was the first time and the last time I ever gambled. And I won and I won and I won—I could not stop winning. There was more money lying there than I had ever seen before. And I couldn’t quit. The guy who gets that far ahead, he can never quit.” Finally, a loser begged Chavez to buy his camera so that he could keep on losing. Chavez said he had forgotten what happened to the money, but he kept the camera and started taking pictures.

He had just joined the Navy in 1944, and he served for two years on a destroyer escort on weather patrol out of Saipan. He had never been on a ship before, and at first he was very seasick, and frightened of the sea. In fact, the ocean still disturbs him. “I like the sea, but I don’t rest there,” he said. “I think. The waves coming in, you know. They make me think. I love the woods. Big trees. That’s where I rest.”

In 1948, Cesar Chavez and Helen Fabela got married. “We went to live on a farm near San Jose, and there was a little tiny house for me and my family. I was married, Richard was married, and there was my mother and my dad, my sister, and my other brother. We worked the strawberries, sharecropping—it was horrible. We worked there for two and a half years, and we never made any money. We figured later the whole family together was making twenty-three cents an hour. At the end of the month, we just didn’t have anything left over. We worked two and half years. Every day, every single day—Saturday, Sunday.

And I couldn't get my dad to leave. I didn't want to leave him there, yet I couldn't get him to leave — because he'd made a commitment, you know. His word! There were hundreds of people caught in this exploitation. Finally, we got him to admit that we were being taken, and that the best way was just to leave the whole damn thing.”

In 1950, Richard and Cesar went to work in a lumber camp on the Smith River, just south of the Oregon border. It was summer, and they slept in the big woods along the river. One day, they asked the foreman if they could build a cabin in the woods, and because they were both good, dependable workers the permission was granted. In their spare time, they built a serviceable cabin, and in the process learned basic carpentry. For Richard, this was a turning point, because not long after that he became an apprentice carpenter. The brothers loved the cool forest and the river, they were proud of their cabin, and they were making good money. But although both had steady work and could have brought their families there, they returned in the same year to San Jose, where they lived in a slum area known as Sal Si Puedes—a name that may be translated, roughly, as Escape If You Can. Before long, Richard became a carpenter, and Cesar, supporting his family as best he could, took the first steps in his career as a labor organizer and the founder of what may become the first effective farm worker's union in America.

It is as an organizer, rather than a union leader, that Chavez sees himself, and one afternoon while we were driving back to Delano from some appointments he had had in San Francisco he told me, with cheerful fatalism, that when his union is established and his own people, no longer preoccupied with survival and aspiring to consumer status, find him too thorny for their liking and kick him out, he might like to go and organize somewhere else — maybe in the Mexican slums of East Los Angeles. He always speaks passionately about organizing, but he does not romanticize his work. “There's no trick to organizing, there's no shortcut. A good organizer is someone willing to work long and hard,” he said. “Just keep talking to people, and the people will respond. People can be organized for the most ridiculous things. They can be organized for bad as well as good. Look at the John Birch Society. Look at Hitler. The reactionaries are always better organizers. The right has a lot of discipline that the left lacks. The left always dilutes itself. Instead of merging to go after the common enemy, the left splinters, and the splinters go after one another. Meanwhile, the right keeps after its objective, pounding away, pounding away.”

Going south through Oakland toward the freeway, Chavez pointed out St. Mary's Church, in whose hall he had held his first big meeting for the Community Service Organization. “I was green, you know, but we brought in over four hundred people. Oh, I was so happy! I was *happy!*”

By the time we reached the freeway, it was nearly five, and an hour later we were still caught on a belt of noise and ugliness that bored through the sprawling suburbs of the Bay area. The rush-hour traffic was stifling any chance we had of reaching Delano in time for a union meeting that evening, and Chavez said, “Maybe I could stop in San Jose and just say hello to my mother and my dad.” Aside from his parents and his son Fernando, he has two

sisters and a brother living in San Jose. The brother is a carpenter. One sister is married to a carpenter, the other to a plasterer. "They're pretty good guys," Chavez said. "But they're not interested in what we're doing. I don't see too much of them." Chavez talked a lot about his sister Rita, who became president of the San Jose C.S.O. In a fight to get blacks into her chapter, he said proudly, she had beaten down the prejudice against them that she found among many of the Mexicans. "Oh, Rita's great!" he said. "If she had a choice, she'd be swinging with us right now, down in Delano.

Chavez has always wanted to have his family involved in his organizing work as much as possible. "Of course, I'm lucky to have an exceptional woman," he said. "Even if I come home at four in the morning, I give her a full report on what has happened, and to this day—well, most of the time—she still wants me to do this."

He recalled one Sunday when his wife succeeded in getting him to accompany the family on a picnic. There were so many workers coming to see him on their day off that he planned to leave very early in the morning to avoid refusing them. But a few arrived before he could get away and had to be left unattended to, and Chavez felt so miserable all day that he ruined the picnic for everybody. That evening, he told his wife that he was being pulled apart, that he had to give his full time to the people and just do the best he could with his own family. "It's lucky I have Helen there, because I'm never really home," he said. "I was home when two of the children were born and away for all the rest." He closed his eyes and massaged them with the fingers of one hand—a characteristic gesture of distress. "You know, I always felt that because I really wanted to do something for people this would be all right. But we talk about sacrificing ourselves and often we are sacrificing others. By the time Birdie came, Helen was pretty much used to it, I guess, but . . ." He stopped speaking for a minute, then opened his eyes, and when he spoke again his voice was harsher. "You cannot have it both ways. Either you concentrate your attention on the people who have claims on you or you say, 'No, I have to help many more at their expense.' You don't exclude them totally, and they get more attention than anybody else, but they aren't going to get enough. You can't have it both ways. You cannot! Anybody who uses the family as an excuse not to do what he has to do . . ." He stopped again, then resumed, in a quieter voice. "I haven't been home in four nights. Sometimes I'm away for ten nights, maybe more. It hurts me not to be home with my family, you know—I feel it. The whole thing is rough on the children. I know that. They don't like living in poverty, especially when they know that it's intentional on my part. And things get harder as they get older—it's harder to get nice hand-me-down clothes and everything. But they are great, they are just great!" He smiled. "I told them that they were better off than the migrants, that at least they had a purpose in their lives, and they understood this — they really did. Of course, they think I'm pretty old-fashioned. I tease Sylvia about always fixing her hair—the waste of time, you know. I told her that women are prettier the way they are made, that they should leave their hair the way it came. And I make a lot of fun of people who give their spare time to mowing the lawn, or washing their cars, or playing golf. To me, it's such a waste of time. How can you justify doing that sort of thing as long as all these other things are going on—the suffering?"

I said nothing, and a moment later, very quietly, he went on. “There’s a saying in Spanish, *Lo que no puedes ver en tu casa, lo has de tener*—‘That which you don’t like you wind up having at home.’ Sylvia finished high school, and I’ve asked her several times about registering for college, but she won’t go. And Fernando . . .” He nodded. “My son is a good golfer. He is a *real* Mexican-American.” This was the first truly bitter remark I had ever heard him make. He caught himself immediately. “Well, that isn’t fair,” he said. “By ‘real Mexican-American’ I mean someone who is just interested in material things. But Fernando isn’t that way at all. He had a hell of a time in school, you know—we finally had to take him out. One fight after another. There was one grower’s son who was really out to get him. Here I was, dedicated to non-violence, and my son fighting right and left.” He managed a smile. “He always won. I think they finally had a great big fight that was supposed to settle things once and for all, and Fernando knocked him out.” Chavez frowned a little, evidently to repress a small note of pride. “By that time, anyway, he had already lost interest in the strike.”

Chavez was quiet for a while, and then he said, “I never took him fishing or to a ball game, or even to the movies.” His tone in judging himself had the same harshness that he had levied on his son. “I only took him to the office or out on the picket line. He’d be interested at first, but after a while he lost interest. He still doesn’t know what he wants to do.. He’s out of a job, and he’s not really in school, and he’s liable to the draft.” Chavez rubbed his eyes again.

“My family is deprived,” he said flatly, after a time. “And we’re going to stay deprived until we can get education. I can’t get them to read. If I could just get *one* of them . . .” He paused. “Maybe Birdie.” Nodding, he repeated, “Maybe Birdie.”

Between the Oakland suburbs and San Jose, a countryside of small truck farms and farmhouses has not yet been sealed over with asphalt and concrete. Chavez remarked on how pretty these small farms were in comparison with the huge food factories of Delano. “They have life in them,” he said. “People still live here.” Seeing men and women stooping in the fields, he talked about the short-handled hoe, which he regards as a symbol of man’s exploitation of man. “You have to caress a plant tenderly to make it grow, and the short hoe makes you bend over and work closer to the plant,” he said. “But a good man can work just as well with a long hoe, without the exhaustion.” Stoop labor with the short hoe is so painful that in speeches to workers an attack on the short hoe brings a wild cheer of anger and approval every time he uses it.

We left the freeway, turning east up the gleaming glass-plastic-neon boulevard that is San Jose’s main thoroughfare; at the end of it low, bare ridges of the Santa Clara Mountains ease the eye. Toward the eastern edge of town is Sal Si Puedes. Of the many communities that Chavez has known since he left the Gila River Valley, he feels drawn most strongly to Sal Si Puedes, where he lived for long periods both before and after he was married. He pointed out a wooden church that he had helped to build. Sal Si Puedes was the first community that he organized for the C.S.O., and there is scarcely a house along those small streets that he hasn’t been in. The part of the *barrio* where his parents live has a few trees and patches of lawn among the bungalows. We stopped at a mailbox

marked "Chavez," and he went into the yellow stucco house to see if his parents were at home. When he came out to get me, he was tailed by two toddling nephews, and he was laughing.

Chavez's parents are about eighty, and they both have spectacles and snowy hair. The father, who must have been a very strong, good-looking man, has been troubled for several years with age and weight and deafness; his wife is still very alert and active. After I had said hello to Chavez's parents, he introduced me to a niece of his, a pretty fifteen-year-old named Rachel, and to his son Fernando, a tall, strong-looking boy with a generous, open face and manner. Fernando held a golf iron in his hand.

Chavez, sitting on the couch with his mother in the living room, asked Rachel if she was coming to Delano the next summer to help in the strike, and she said enthusiastically that she would like that. I had the feeling that he was talking to his son, and apparently Fernando thought so, too, because he murmured mildly that he had meant to accompany Manuel to New York to help with the boycott and wondered why Manuel had not let him know that he was leaving.

Chavez looked at his son. "I guess you know we don't pay people to strike," he said in a flat voice.

"I know," the boy said uneasily. "I wanted to go anyway." He met his father's gaze.

"Well, it's never too late, I guess," Chavez said. He turned back to his mother.

Fernando glanced at me and smiled; the smile made no comment. I asked him about his golf, and he told me that he shared a bag of clubs with a friend and that he had once broken seventy..

Chavez spoke with his mother for all but a few minutes of the hour or so we spent in his parent's house; the pleasure he took in her company was a pleasure to see, and I doubt if her eyes left him once during the visit. His father sat quietly on a chair by the door. Chavez speaks warmly of his father, from whom he learned his contempt for that special kind of male self-consciousness that Mexicans call *machismo*, unlike most Mexican-Americans, Mr. Chavez never considered it unmanly to bathe his children or take them to the toilet or do small menial jobs around the house.

Before we left, Chavez took his mother's fragile hands in his and said goodbye. On the way to the road, he knelt to talk with his small nephews, giving them ten cents each. He asked the older child his name, and the boy said he was Aguilar Chavez Junior the Third. Everybody burst out laughing except Aguilar Junior the Third, who merely looked pleased. The boys said goodbye to "Tio Cesar," and he left them grinning broadly. "You see?" he told me. "Money talks."

In the car I told Chavez that I thought Fernando had seemed sincere about going to New York, and he nodded. Apparently, Manuel had mentioned before leaving that Fernando wished to go along, but Cesar had not taken it seriously. Now he did, however, and for a while, as we drove south, he spoke proudly of Fernando. "We'll make a good organizer out of him yet," he said in a delightful tone. But then he caught himself and laughed. "I know," he said. "This time I'll let him come on his own decision, with no pressure. That will be best."



From San Jose, we continued south on U.S. 101, following El Camino Real — the Royal Way — which once connected the old Franciscan missions of California. Since Chavez had given up any idea of getting to the union meeting, he decided to visit one of the most beautiful of all the missions, which was only a few miles off our route. “Our time is our own for the rest of the evening,” he said. “We can spend it as we like.”

Along both sides of the road were pretty orchards, but Chavez took no pleasure in them. Belted in, shrunk down in his seat, he peered out at them through a corner of his window. “Oh, I picked a lot of prune, a *lot*,” he said. “I hated it.” Farther on, the orchards gave way to the soft, flowing golden hills of the small Santa Clara Mountains, and here and there, like islets in the stream of golden grass, stood old, dark, sturdy oak trees. The oaks made him sit up again; he called my attention to the more beautiful ones as we rode along, and said that oaks—*los robles*—were his favorite trees. With disgust, he pointed to a place where giant oaks had been hacked down to make way for a big raw-metal cistern.

At Gilroy, it was late in the summer day, though the light was still, warm on the round crests of the low hills. On one of these hills, to the south, the Mission San Juan Bautista was founded, in 1797. Its hill overlooks a small valley and is overlooked in turn, by higher hills. The mission is of white adobe, roofed with tiles of the fine old reds, and the church, with the portico of its monastery, forms one side of one of the oldest Spanish plazas in California. The plaza is fronted on two other sides by high adobe and frame buildings of the nineteenth-century West—the Golden West, to judge from the nugget color of their paint. The columns of the portico are three feet thick, and they reminded Chavez of the walls of the adobe farmhouse in the Gila River Valley. He laid his small brown hand on the old surfaces. “You can always tell when adobe walls are thick,” he said. “Even from head on and far away. It’s almost magical.”

We walked the length of the empty portico. Dark was coming, but the light was so clear—we were far from the cities—that different reds could still be made out on old tiles of different ages. All was softened by ancient evergreens and crusting lichens, and under the caves violet-green swallows fitted out and returned. Chavez pointed out the old floor of the portico, which was a broken, weathered mix of stone, adobe, ancient brick, and concrete—anything that had come to hand over the years. He said that he longed to have such a floor in the buildings at the Forty Acres, the new union headquarters outside Delano, but that the members would never tolerate it. “They’re real Americans,” he said affectionately. “They want everything to look slick and expensive, to shoe the world that their union is a success.” He laughed. “Well, we’re going to put a wall around the Forty Acres, to make it a kind of cloister, like this mission, and the beautiful side will be facing *in*, so that the people who built it can enjoy it. If outsiders wish to come in and look they’ll be very welcome.”

Our shoes whispered on old stones. Slowly, we walked around the mission in the gathering dusk. Chavez said that he liked to think his adobe buildings at the Forty Acres would weather as well as the old missions, but the state had demanded steel

reinforcements; he said this as if steel, lacking the right spirit, might prove to be the weakest link.

“I can’t remember when my interest in the missions started,” he said. “It must have been very deep. When I got married, Helen didn’t know very much about missions, so on our honeymoon we visited just about all of them, from San Diego north to Sonoma. What appeals to me is their ability to withstand the ages. Some are two hundred years old, you know. And this is for me a sort of symbol of what happens to people with the right attitudes. Everywhere else, they Indians were exploited—whatever religion they had was taken away from them and they were made Christians. Of course, the missions used them, too, but the whole spirit was different. The Mexican government perceived this, and that’s why they wanted to destroy the missions. Oh, they were animals, some of those Mexican governors! They were *animals!* You see, it was really a Dark Age in terms of human life, but the missions gave sanctuary to the Indians, and it was a whole new approach to human beings. The Franciscans came and they said, ‘These are human beings.’ And the missions reflect this spirit—not just the architecture but the way they have lasted.” He looked around him, and continued, “They are beautiful. They are peaceful. And I think that comes from a kind of crusading spirit, completely opposed to what was happening in the country before and afterward. There were few Indian uprisings here, very few. The big fight was between the Franciscans and the governments — first Spain and then Mexico—to keep the soldiers from rape and looting. Those Spanish soldiers were terrible. Hopeless. They were always at odds with the Franciscans, because the priests wouldn’t give in on moral grounds. ‘You can’t abuse Indians,’ they said. ‘You can’t abuse women.’ The Franciscans made the soldiers respect the Indians. There were abuses on their side, too, but in general the moral force was great. Their history was long and most of the records have been lost, so the abuses by the Franciscans have been exaggerated. Most people don’t realize what these priests did for the Indians—in South America and Mexico as well as here, and at great cost. They neutralized the governments. If the Church had been active in the United States at the time the Negroes were coming in, with the same kind of moral force, the present mess would never have developed. And it wouldn’t have happened with the Indians — the mass slaughters, wiping them out.” He sighed. “Bartolemé de Las Casas—he was a great Dominican missionary, and he fought the Crown, and finally he made them understand. Today, the Franciscans have only about four of the old missions. There’s one mission that has been fully restored by the government—La Purísima Concepción, near Lompoc, on the coast. They made the tiles exactly the way the tiles were made by the Indians, and it’s beautiful, but it’s empty. It’s cold. If the Church is not there—the people—it loses its life. It dies.”

When the United States acquired California, the Indians who were inherited from the mission farms were paid half of what other workers got, and their objection to this treatment was a factor in a general massacre that took place between 1850 and 1852, when Indian numbers in California, already low, were reduced from perhaps eighty-five thousand to about thirty-one thousand. This free-enterprise solution to the Indian problem caused a temporary labor shortage, but the advantages of the discriminatory pay scale in keeping

labor groups at odds with one another were obvious, and the device has been used effectively ever since. For example, when the Filipinos arrived in force, in the nineteen-twenties, they were paid even less than the Mexicans, who were already in a very poor bargaining position, since most of them had entered the United States illegally, as “wetbacks,” and could be, and often were, deported before payday came around, or when they protested too strenuously about anything. Traditionally, Mexicans and Filipinos have competed for the available work—usually stoop labor, since preference in the tree jobs is given to the Anglos—and, despite Chavez’s most earnest efforts, there is still noticeable distance in the union between the two groups that formed it in 1965.

“I hear more and more Mexicans talking about *la raza*—to build up their pride, you know,” Chavez told me. “Some people don’t look at it as racism, but when you say ‘*la raza*,’ you are saying an anti-gringo thing, and it won’t stop there. Today it’s anti-gringo, tomorrow it will be anti-Negro, and the day after it will be anti-Filipino, anti-Puerto Rican. And then it will be anti-poor-Mexican, and anti-darker-skinned Mexican. We had a stupid guy who just wanted to play politics with the union, and he began to whip up *la raza* against the white volunteers, and even had some of the farm workers and the pickets and the organizers hung up on *la raza*. So I took him on. These things have to be met head on. On discrimination, I don’t even give the members the privilege of a vote, and I’m not ashamed of it. No, the whole business of discrimination can’t exist here. So often, these days, the leaders are afraid, and even though they feel strongly against racism, they will not speak out against it. If the leadership is united, then it can say, ‘All right, if you’re going to do things that way, then you’ll have to get rid of us.’ You have to speak out immediately, the first time. Anyway, this guy was talking to people and saying he didn’t like Filipinos taking over the union. So a small group came to me and said that a lot of people were very mad because the Filipinos were coming in. And I really reacted. I said a lot of people would be mad if Negroes came in, in large numbers like that, and I said they were going to accept the Filipinos if I had to shove them down their throats.” Chavez paused, as if surprised at his own violence. “I told them, ‘That’s the way I feel.’ And so they left. A couple of days later, they said they wanted a big meeting. And I said, ‘O.K., let’s have a big meeting.’ So at the big meeting they said they wanted to discuss discrimination — in other words, they wanted to take a vote to discriminate. And I said, ‘Over my dead body. There will be no such vote taken here, and furthermore, before you get rid of the Filipinos you’ll have to get rid of me.’ ‘No vote?’ they said, and I said, ‘It can’t be done. Those of you who don’t like it, I suggest that *you* get out, because you’re not doing anybody any good. Or, even better, *I’ll* get out. I’ll join the Filipinos, and we’ll build a trade union.’ Well, I’d say ninety-five per cent of the audience stood up and applauded. And this small group felt isolated. The employers, of course, have used this for years and years—one group set against the other. I explained this to the audience; and I told them that the Filipinos would be a tremendous asset—new people, new ideas. That’s what a union is. *La raza* is a very dangerous concept. I speak very strongly against it among the *chicanos*. At this point in the struggle, they respect me enough so that they don’t emphasize *la raza*, but as soon as this is over they’ll be against me, because I make fun of it, and I knock down *machismo*, too. Oh, I heard a sick, sick speech by a Mexican the other day. I don’t like to see any man discriminating. But when a

Mexican discriminates — *oob!*” He winced. “That *really* cuts me. As a Mexican-American, I expect more of them than of anybody else. I love them, and I guess I’d like them to be perfect.

Severe back pains that had been dragging Chavez down for months finally forced him to take some time off last autumn, and he went to St. Anthony’s, a Franciscan seminary in Santa Barbara, where he could have daily therapy at a hospital. I found him flat on his back in bed. In crisp white pajamas, he looked small. He greeted me cheerfully but made no effort to sit up when he took my hand, his drawn face patched with gray from months of pain. Over his head, three rosaries hung from an extended bar, and with them a Jewish mezuzah on a silver chain, which he always puts on under his shirt when he goes out. “I’m sure Christ wore a mezuzah,” he said, with a grin. “He certainly didn’t wear a cross.” ON a wall of the room, as in his office in Delano, there was a Mexican straw crucifix. It was a small room, and the bed, a washstand, two stiff chairs, and a small bureau filled it. On the bureau was a borrowed tape recorder, with tapes of some flamenco music by Manitas de Plata and songs of Joan Baez. There was also a framed photograph of Gandhi.

There had been some bad news from Delano. Mack Lyons, the workers’ representative at DiGiorgio, had found two groups of non-union pruners working in DiGiorgio’s Arvin vineyards, and when the pruners were questioned they said that the vineyards had been unable to obtain a so-called successor clause in the contract with DiGiorgio, guaranteeing that the contract would bind a new owner, this was a serious blow, and Chavez had called an emergency meeting to discuss how to handle the new threat. The next phase of the long battle was clearly going to be a difficult one, and Chavez would need all his strength for it. (In March of this year, Dr. Janet Travell, who treated President Kennedy, concluded that Chavez’s back trouble was not a degenerative-disc condition, as had been thought, but a muscle spasm caused by the fact that one of his legs is shorter than the other and one side of his pelvis is smaller—an imbalance to which, as he grows older and less resilient, his muscles can no longer adjust. Dr. Travell’s treatment is the first that has given Chavez any real relief.)

Last fall in Santa Barbara, there was speculation that the long fast Chavez had made earlier in the year might have aggravated his back condition, and in the sun on a porch outside his room I talked with Helen Chavez about the fast. She told me that at the beginning he had kept it a secret for about three days. At home, he would pretend that he had already eaten or that he wasn’t hungry. Then one day Manuel said to her, “Is he still fasting?” After that, she offered Cesar all his favorite foods, and still he would not eat. Finally, she confronted him in his office, and when he admitted he was fasting she got very upset; she was sure he would harm himself. “The kids were already worried,” she said. And when I told them, they said, ‘Dad looks awful. Will he be O.K.?’ But after another day or so we got used to the idea and went along with him.”

Not everyone went along. The fast, which lasted twenty-five days, split the union down the middle. Mrs. Chavez and Richard and Manuel knew that he had been fasting before he announced it, but even they were stunned by his intention of prolonging the fast

indefinitely. So was LeRoy Chatfield, who still speaks with awe of the speech in which Chavez had called a special meeting for twelve noon on Monday, February 19, 1968, at a hall in Delano, and the strikers and the office staff as well as their families were there. Several acts of violence had been committed by union people, and he talked for an hour and a half about non-violence. He discussed Vietnam, wondering aloud how so many of his listeners could deplore the violence in Asia, and yet promote it in the United States. He said that the Mexican tradition of proving manliness—*machismo*—through violence was in error. *La Causa* must not risk a single life on either side, because it *was* a cause, not just a union, and had to deal with people not as membership cards or Social Security numbers but as human beings, one by one.

“Cesar took a very hard line,” Chatfield told me. “He said we were falling back on violence in the strike because we weren’t creative enough or imaginative enough to find another solution—because we didn’t *work* hard enough. One of the things he said in the speech was that he felt we had lost our will to win—by which he meant that behaving violently or advocating violence, or even thinking that maybe violence isn’t such a bad thing, is really losing your will to win, your commitment to win. This seems like a very idealistic position, but there’s truth in it. Anarchy leads to chaos, and out of chaos rises the demagogue. That’s one of the reasons he is so upset about *la raza*. The same Mexicans that ten years ago were talking about themselves as Spaniards are coming on real strong these days as Mexicans. Everyone should be proud of what he is, of course, but race is only skin-deep. It’s phony, and it comes out of frustration — the *la raza* people are not secure. They want to sue Cesar as a symbol of their nationalism. But he doesn’t want any part of it. He said to me just the other day, ‘Can’t they understand that that’s just the way Hitler started?’ A few months ago, a big foundation gave some money to a *la raza* group—they liked the outfit’s sense of pride, or something—and Cesar really told them off. He feels that racism will destroy our union faster, than anything else—that it plays right into the growers’ hands if they can keep the minorities fighting, pitting one race against another, one group against another.”

In his speech that day, Chavez discussed the civil-rights movement and how, in its recourse to violence, it had made black people suffer; black homes, not white, were being burned, and black sons killed. The union, he said, had raised the hopes of many poor people. It had a responsibility to those people, whose hopes, along with all the union gains, would be destroyed after the first cheap victories of violence. Finally, he announced the fast. It was not a hunger strike because its purpose was not strategic; it was an act of prayer and love for the union members, because, as their leader, he felt responsible for the acts of all of them. There would be no vote on the fast, which would continue for an indefinite period, and had, in fact, begun the week before. He was not going into seclusion, and would continue his work as best he could. He asked that the people in the room keep the news entirely to themselves. Since it was difficult to fast at home, and since the Forty Acres was the spiritual home of the union, he would walk there as soon as he had finished speaking; and remain there until the fast was done. “His act was intensely personal,” Chavez told me. “And the whole theme of his speech was love. In fact, his last words to us before he left

the room and started that long walk to Forty Acres were something like 'I am doing this because I love you.' "

Helen Chavez followed Cesar from the hall, and everyone sat for some time in silence. Then the meeting was taken over by Larry Itliong, the assistant director, who said straight out that Brother Chavez should be persuaded to come off the fast. Manuel Chavez then declared that Cesar was an Indian, and therefore stubborn, and that once he had made up his mind to do something, nothing anyone could say was going to stop him. Other members made many other comments. One man, for example, dismissed all the talk about striker violence as grower propaganda, and therefore saw no reason for the fast. Some of the Protestant and agnostics in the union, white and brown, still resented the Catholic aura of the Sacramento march of the year before, and now they felt offended all over again. They were supported by some Catholics, who felt that the Church was being exploited, and also by most of the white volunteers, the Jews especially, who disliked any religious overtone whatever. For the first week or so, almost the whole board of directors was against the fast. On the other hand, the membership, largely Catholic, accepted it in apprehensive faith. The people complied with Chavez's request that no one try a fast of sympathy on his own, but he learned later, from the candidly expressed annoyance of their wives, that three young men had taken a vow of chastity for the duration of the fast, and held to it. He speaks of this sacrifice with awe and regret, but it seemed to him a moving example of the farm workers' new spirit.

There were many misgivings and many doubts about what Chavez was trying to accomplish. "When we visited Cesar in his little room at the Forty Acres," Chatfield told me, "he would point at the wall and say, 'See that white wall? Well, imagine ten different-colored balls, all jumping up and down. One ball is called Religion, another Propaganda, another Organization, another Law, and so forth. When people look at that wall and see those balls, different people look at different balls, and each person keeps his eye on his own ball. For each person, the balls mean different things, but for everyone they can mean something.' I began to see what he meant. My ball was Propaganda, and I kept my eye on that. I could therefore be perfectly comfortable, and understand the fast completely in those terms, and not negate the nine other balls—Organizing, say. And, as a matter of fact, we never organized so many people in such a short time, before or since. The fast gave the lie to the growers' claim that we had no following. Some people came every night to attend Mass at the Forty Acres — came sixty-five, eighty-five miles every night. People stood in line for an hour, two hours, to talk with him. Cesar saw it as a fantastic opportunity to talk to one man, one family, at a time. When that person leaves, he goes away with something. He's no longer a member; he's an organizer. At the Sunday Mass, we had as many as two thousand people. That's what the growers don't understand—we're all over the state. In fact, there's nowhere in this state or anywhere in the Southwest where the people don't know about Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. And they say, 'When is he coming? Are we next?'" "

As the fast wore on through February and into March, many of the farm workers became worried, and a number of strikers came to Manuel and swore that they would

never be violent again if he could just persuade Cesar to quit. Other union members were made increasingly uncomfortable by the religious implications of the fast, especially after the seventeenth day, when Chavez asked his brother Richard to construct a simple cross — the materials cost a dollar and a half, according to Richard—which was later burned by vandals. The cross was the ultimate affront to at least two volunteers. One dismissed the entire fast as “a cheap publicity stunt.” The other, who had once been a priest, accused Chavez of having a Messiah complex. Both soon quit the United Farm Workers for good.

At a Mass of Thanksgiving that concluded the fast, Chavez was too weak to speak, and a brief speech was read for him. In English and in Spanish. After describing the purpose of the fast, he concluded as follows: “When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belongs 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 by 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 non-violent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us be men.”

—PETER MATTHIESSEN