

A Conversation With Cesar Chavez c.1970  
By John Moyer

With the recent signing of contracts in the California grape industry, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee has emerged as the first successful organization of farm workers in the nation's history. Its leader, Cesar Chavez, is often viewed either as the Messiah or the devil, depending upon the perspective.

Those who know him intimately recognize him as a superb organizer, a top-notch administrator, and a human being who cares deeply about people and the kind of society in which we live. I recently spoke with a farm worker in Delano who said, "Cesar taught me that I am a man, that I am free to make decisions and free to make my own mistakes." The life style of the Union confirms this statement.

I first met Cesar Chavez in 1965, when the grape strike was only two months old. I was meeting with members of the California Migrant Ministry which receives support from the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries as well as other major church groups. The CMM has worked closely with the Union since 1962.

Over the past five years I have come to know Mr. Chavez as a man who has a deeper understanding of what the church is about than most professional churchmen. There is little doubt that his has contributed significantly to the mutually supportive relationship which exists between the Union and the California Migrant Ministry.

I conducted the following interview in a car en route from San Jose to Salinas. Mr. Chavez, as usual, was under the pressure of time and events but his statements reveal something of the measure of the man.

John R. Moyer

Mr. Moyer is Secretary for Special Program, Division of Higher Education & The American Missionary Association, United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. His primary work is with farm labor and related concerns.

**John Moyer:** Why were you successful at organizing farm workers when all previous attempts had failed?

**Cesar Chavez:** I think there were many elements involved. The other movements never stayed with it long enough to find out whether they could win or lose. They gave up in the first round. Secondly, we were able to put together a group of people in Delano who wanted to win. The desire to win was most important, and with that desire, we were willing to stay out and pay the price to win.

**Moyer:** Was it also true that the earlier organizers had outside vested interests? Was this a problem?

**Chavez:** No, I don't think so. The people who tried to organize—at least in the organizing level of it—were, I'm convinced, very decent people. They suffered a lot of tremendous personal losses.

**Moyer:** You have not always been organizing farm workers. How did you get into this in the beginning? How did you decide to organize farm workers? I believe you were working with Community Service Organization . . .

**Chavez:** Well, I was organizing farm workers then, too, except that I wasn't organizing them into a union. But most of my work has been with farm workers. During that period with CSO, we were trying to organize them into civic action groups. But I always believed that the union had to come in order to bring some changes about. In fact, when I joined CSO back in 1952, the first thing I asked Fred Ross was, "What about the farm workers? I want to do something that will give the workers a union." Fred told me, "If CSO gets big enough, CSO will become a union." So I said, "Fine," and I joined. But, of course, it never did.

But to go back to your earlier questions, there are other reasons why we were successful. We always believed that the growers weren't that powerful, and I could never subscribe to the theory that the growers were invincible. I realized that the growers appeared to be so powerful simply because the workers had no power. If they could gain some power, the growers wouldn't seem as invincible. Most unions in the past had attempted to strike and organize at the same time. Instead of doing the two massive jobs at once, we separated them. In Delano, we did the organizing first. When we went into the strike, we weren't quite ready, but the circumstances were such that a strike was unavoidable. We had fifty percent of the battle won when we went into the strike because we had an entity; we had people who knew each other and believed in the cause.

**Moyer:** How do you go about building an organization? What do you do at the beginning?

**Chavez:** Well, first of all, there had to be a need. Then there has to be someone who is willing to do it, who is willing to take whatever risks are required. I don't think it can be done with money alone. The person has to be dedicated to the task. There has to be some other motivation.

In this country, many have the idea that organizing people is very difficult, but it isn't. It becomes difficult only at the point where you begin to see other things that are easier. But if you are willing to give the time and make the sacrifice, it's not that difficult to organize. Maintaining an organization is much more difficult. I don't look at organizing as something which happens by chance, or as something very complicated. I look at organizing as a lot of hard work. I think that many organizers lose out because they don't have the patience. First of all, people think that you need to have one hundred percent participation to be successful; and secondly, they feel it has to happen right away. But really

what happens is a chain reaction. If you put one worker together with another, that reaction is not going to be too noticeable. But when you put a hundred people together, that reaction is going to carry. And it multiplies. When you have people together who believe in something very strongly—whether its religion or politics or unions—things happen. We are past the stage where it is difficult to get people into the union. That fight has been won. I think the fight right now is to convince the growers that the best thing for them to do is to sign with the union.

At the beginning, up until the strike, everything we did was very deliberate. We had all the time we needed; nobody was pushing us.

Another thing about organizing, you can't wait until you get everything organized and then give benefits; you give benefits as you organize. The group is organized for a purpose. If you tell the worker that he should come into the union, and once it is strong, he will get something—*forget it!*

Organizing is an educational process. The best educational process in the union is the picket line and the boycott. You learn about life. It's the same with education everywhere. When you learn by doing, you learn faster than by other methods. Once you have people who *see* what has happened, they become your best organizers. It's a question of having people turned on, not by gimmickry, but by concrete benefits that they receive when they become members.

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**Moyer:** In the very beginning, when you first try to get people involved, how do you go about finding people? Is it a matter of talking to individuals?

**Chavez:** I play the percentages. I know that you can spend a lot of time “chasing the rat,” going around in circles and not getting anything accomplished. The name of the game is to talk to people: If you don't talk to people, you can't get started. To establish contacts in a town, I do not believe in going to the “leaders.” I want to build leadership loyal to the union and to no one else. I just go to the first house in the labor camp or town and knock on doors. I know there will be at least a few farm workers in every town or camp who will be receptive to me. I also know that you can sell anything you want to sell if you really want to sell it—whether it's good or bad! You knock on twenty doors or so, and twenty guys tell you to go to hell, or that they haven't got time. But maybe at the fortieth or sixtieth house you find the one guy who is all you need. You're not going to organize everything; you're just not going to get it started. You are not really looking for members as much as for organizers. But people don't *know* they are organizers when they actually are. Some of the best organizers don't look upon themselves as such.

That's how the process gets started. The evolution of a group is very fast. Once you get people together, you have a different problem.

The other thing is, you don't know everything. And once you realize that, it makes you realize that other people have got to do things. Organizing is a gamble. I'll be there are more failures in organizing than in any other endeavor you can think of. It's a very risky business. I'm not saying that organizing comes by change. I'm saying that there are an

awful lot of gambles you have to take almost daily. Well, if I'm willing to gamble, I'm willing to gamble on a human being and his ability to do things more than anything else. I like to see people do things, and if they make mistakes, fine, as long as they don't do it intentionally or get into an ego situation. If a guy gets out there and works his head off and draws a blank, fine. It's a learning experience and that will make or break that organizer.

All of us like to have accomplishments. In some cases it has taken us four years to find the right job for the right guy. You will see that someone is dragging and has all sorts of conflicts; he is not producing, he is coming in late. He is not producing because you haven't been able to find the job he can do best. But there *is* a job for everybody. There is something everybody loves to do.

**Moyer:** In other words, what happens to people in this process is very important.

**Chavez:** Sure. People are the raw material. In many cases I know that someone is going to make a mistake, and I point it out. If I get the slightest bit of opposition, I say, okay, let it be an experience, either for him or for me. Sometimes I will say, "No, it won't work," and I'll argue a lot; but sooner or later I come to the realization that, hell, I don't know everything. Then the guy will go out, and if he fails, I will say to myself, "See, I told you." Then I try to help him see that we went through that road. But, even more important, I get surprised sometimes. I say that he shouldn't do it because he will fail, and I'll be damned if he doesn't go ahead with it and he *doesn't* fail. You never get to the point where you know everything.

**Moyer:** I sense that the style of life of people in the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee is very important to you. What's going to happen to this as the union gets big? The union is gaining power.

**Chavez:** Well, power is not bad. Power is what the game's all about, but a lot depends on how the power is used. We are a long way from there. I think churches can have a lot of power. But I doubt if unions can have power to the extent that it is absolute. The forces working for the devil are not really that marshaled, and they haven't got that much to lose, anyway. But the forces working for the employers are well organized, and they have a lot to lose. So the opposition to labor is much more—it's like politics except that politics goes in a cycle and it hits a high spot every two to four years. In labor it is constant, day in and day out. I don't think labor unions really have that much power. I really don't, because if they did there would not be the repressive laws against labor. What has happened is that labor has not been able to keep up with involvement in the total community. You are never strong enough that you don't need help.

**Moyer:** What are some of the groups which have supported you?

**Chavez:** The unions, the church groups, the students, and individuals—not necessarily liberals, but just good, honest people who have some kind of love for farm workers and who would like to see something done about injustice. It is a very wide spectrum.

**Moyer:** What constitutes a good support group?

**Chavez:** Time is more important than money. An individual who is willing to give us his time is more important than an individual who is willing to give us his money. I think money would be number two. But time is the most important element. Everything you do is predicated on time. On the boycott, for example, if an individual is willing to give us his time, we can teach him and set him in a situation where he can multiply himself many times over in terms of support. That's why the students and the young people are so valuable because *they have time*. They are not involved in a lot of things yet; their lives are very young.

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**Moyer:** In other words, the most important thing a support group can give you is people.

**Chavez:** That's right.

**Moyer:** How can you involve people around the country?

**Chavez:** We need people right now for the lettuce boycott. We also need people for other work that has to be done. Some work is being ignored because we are concentrating on the boycott. Getting volunteers is the first step. Putting them to work so they get a good experience is the second and even more crucial step. One of the things we have going for us is that we have people in most cases who are satisfied with their experience because they work and they accomplish something. We operate from the theory that a lot of very good people get confused and can't follow because the leaders don't make it possible for them to follow. If I'm going to go on the boycott, I want it to be as simple as possible. So when people come, we say, "Look, that store over there has lettuce, and we want to get the lettuce out." We do this instead of spending time and money in some kind of elaborate orientation so that by the time we get to the actual job the volunteer is not so confused that he couldn't possibly make a contribution. I think that one of the great, great problems, probably I education, and I *know* in organization, is confusing people to the point where they become immobile. In fact, the more things people can find out for themselves, the more vigor the organization is going to have. Regimentation does not begin at the point where you ask people to vote for a resolution; regimentation begins when you say that this is the only way it can be done. People get attracted to whatever dominates the scene. If all of the activity of a union is in meetings, people get attracted to meetings and Robert's rules of order. If there is action, then they get attracted to action. And if they get attracted to action, they will then produce action.

**Moyer:** What are the implications of the grape strike victory Will the union become a national movement?

**Chavez:** Yes, I think so. There is enough action going on in other areas by workers themselves that will make the union national, not because we have contracts but because we have people who look toward California and the experience we have had here and who want to do the same thing. So in that sense, it's national even now. But in a formalized, structural way, we are a long way from that.

**Moyer:** In Florida there are a lot of black farm workers. One of the things you often hear is that UFWOC is a Chicano organization.

**Chavez:** Well, it would be more correct to say that it is a Chicano and Filipino organization. I never subscribed to the theory that you had to be a Mexican to organize Mexicans, or a black to organize blacks. You can use this as an excuse. If you can't organize, you can come back and say, "Well, hell, I can't organize Filipinos because I'm a Mexican," or, "I can't organize Mexicans because I'm an Anglo and I don't speak Spanish." I don't buy those things. There are excuses. I subscribe to the theory that you've got to have a lot on the ball to organize *anyone*.

**Moyer:** How long do you think it will be before UFWOC becomes national?

**Chavez:** I don't know exactly what becoming national would mean. It will be some time before we have contracts in most of the states. In terms of how soon we will be sending organizers to other areas, it will be a very short time.

**Moyer:** There are many so-called movements among the poor today. What constitutes a legitimate movement?

**Chavez:** I don't want to pass judgment on what is legitimate and what is not legitimate. I think the best judgment one can make is what's successful and what's not successful. A movement may be very legitimate but be very poorly organized and not successful at all.

**Moyer:** I notice that the Ford Foundation recently identified some three hundred Mexican-American organizations in Los Angeles. One hears many articulate spokesmen for many organizations among poor people around the country. Many church people get "up tight" when they hear these people speak and make demands. How do you distinguish between the phonies and the real leaders?

**Chavez:** I think what counts is not whether a guy is phony or "legit." I think what counts is whether the guy has the power. Most often, phonies don't get the power. If a guy goes around and is not willing to do the job and simply has a line of rhetoric and wants to play that game, sooner or later it catches up with him.

**Moyer:** Some of these guys are getting a lot of money from foundations and church groups.

**Chavez:** Well, they can keep going a little longer if they have money. If they don't have money their water is cut off sooner but, in either case—with or without money—their days are numbered because no one can stand by himself. You've got to stand together with a lot of people. There is nothing phony about power; either you have it or you don't.

**Moyer:** Are there other organizations which are developing a power base with whom you could comfortably relate?

**Chavez:** Since we are poor, and since we are a minority group, we relate comfortably to poor people's organizations. But the other job is to relate to other organizations which are not poor and are not minority groups but are powerful, so that we can try to get them to turn around and to take care of some of these problems that they can be an instrument in solving.

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**Moyer:** When you talk about other organizations that are not poor, what do you mean?

**Chavez:** A very good example is the church, with which we feel very comfortable. That's probably the best example of an organization with power but not yet involved with the things it should be involved in to bring about some change.

**Moyer:** Do you have any ideas about a future relationship with the church, or the churches? We're not really a monolithic organization yet, you know.

**Chavez:** I know. I think there are two levels at which we are involved now. We are involved at the philosophical level, and we're involved at the gut level where people in the church are either for us or against us. This second level is where we have some action—through either the strike or the boycott. And that kind of involvement is nasty. We're not involving the National Council of Churches at Riverside Drive in New York City as much as we are involving Marcos Munos, boycotter from Delano, with Rabbi Miller in Boston. That kind of involvement is being repeated over and over in hundreds of places. You put all that together and it makes quite an involvement.

**Moyer:** The involvement you are talking about is more with individuals than with institutions, then.

**Chavez:** Well, we have to have the permission of the institutions to involve individuals and in most cases we have been able to get that permission. We place more emphasis on this than on those institutions where we get some money but we don't get anybody involved. As I said, the time of the individual is more important than the money.

**Moyer:** I understand.

**Chavez:** Not that we don't need the money!

**Moyer:** Cesar, a number of "liberal" politicians have asked you for support, but you have not given it. I'm thinking of people like Unruh, Tunney, and, after Bobby Kennedy's assassination, Eugene McCarthy. Why have you withheld support from people who at least seem to be sympathetic to your cause?

**Chavez:** I think one of the reasons is that we are just too involved with our own problems, trying to keep alive. Secondly, we don't want to get involved unless the people are involved. One of the big problems we are faced with in organization is that people will say, "Yes, I support you," and give their name and then don't do anything. If we are going to support someone, we want to get in and do a job for him, like we did for Bobby Kennedy. It isn't every day that we can do that job—one, because we are very involved in our own job; and two, because sometimes the people don't feel like they want to do it.

**Moyer:** Obviously the people did want to support Robert Kennedy.

**Chavez:** Right.

**Moyer:** I gather that you sense a difference.

**Chavez:** Yes, because it will be sometime before there is another public figure that the people want to support as they did Bobby Kennedy. I feel very strongly that we should not endorse people just because we are asked for our endorsement, or because they have a liberal tag. I think we endorse them because they do something for us. If a politician takes a stand for us at a risk to himself, then I think we have a moral obligation to stand with us because he's afraid of losing something, then he doesn't merit our support.

**Moyer:** Are there any politicians today who, in your mind, seem willing to take the kind of risks that Bobby Kennedy took?

**Chavez:** There may be some, but we don't have anybody taking risks with us.

**Moyer:** You have been offered a number of awards by different organizations. I know that you have a policy of not accepting awards. Why?

**Chavez:** There are many reasons. One is that, from a personal standpoint, the award is being offered for something I haven't done. Second, I don't have time. I'm too busy to get awards. Third, I think there is a certain amount of corruption in receiving a lot of awards.

**Moyer:** Corruption?



**Chavez:** I think so. I'm not speaking of criminal corruption. You can be corrupted in many ways. Being committed to groups because of awards limits your freedom, and that's a kind of corruption. I'm not saying it's a crime, and maybe not even a sin, but I'm kind of weird on that one, you know. I hate to get on a plane and leave the scene of action. Also, if I start holding all the awards, other people in the union will never get awards. The life of the union depends upon more people getting known, more people getting to share the limelight, because with the limelight also comes responsibility and with responsibility comes a little sharing of the load. It's much easier for me to have other people sharing the load. We haven't been able to educate the public to that, but we're trying. One out of a hundred organizations, when I say no, will present the award to another officer of the union, and when that happens we are very happy.

**Moyer:** What is the nature of your relationship to the AFL? I noticed a small article in *The New York Times* headlined, "Meany Calls Off Grape Boycott." How do you manage to maintain your individual style and your independence within the framework of a big labor organization?

**Chavez:** A moment ago, you said "churches" instead of "church." So we have "unions" instead of "a union." The AFL is only a federation of unions. The individual unions have a lot of autonomy. They're completely autonomous. But, beyond that, we've had a very good relationship with the AFL-CIO. They have assisted us in many ways, but, they have permitted us to do our job, because they know that we know best. It would be no fun if we couldn't make decisions, right or wrong. That's what gives us the desire and the drive to continue working and to make the sacrifices, because we have the freedom to act. If we were goofing and fouling things up, I have no doubt that things would be different.

As for George Meany calling off the boycott, I asked him to do it. You see, two things are not generally known. One is that in 1939, Meany helped charter one of the first farm labor unions in California. The union lost the strike but he personally got about fifteen thousand dollars for them. The other thing is that, of all the people I talked to, George Meany was the only labor leader who recognized that, in this modern age, a boycott is more important than a strike. So when we were ready to call off the boycott, I thought it was a good gesture to ask him to do it.

**Moyer:** So you are able to maintain the freedom you have always had within the larger framework of the AFL-CIO.

**Chavez:** Yes.

**Moyer:** Joining the AFL-CIO still gives you the freedom to disagree with top leadership positions? I guess there has been some disagreement on legislative positions, hasn't there?

**Chavez:** Yes. It was an honest disagreement. We feel that the present National Labor Relations Act is not going to give us the right to organize. We either want no law or we want the kind of law the other unions got when they were at the beginning stage.

**Moyer:** The fact that you differed with top AFL-CIO leadership on this does not in any way hinder your relationship?

**Chavez:** Oh, no. If you consider how many disagreements they have among themselves, this is nothing! There are honest disagreements among unions just as there are among church groups.

**Moyer:** Cesar, what kind of a society would you like to see in this country, and what might be the possibilities of building it?

**Chavez:** I've always maintained that it isn't the form that's going to make the difference. It isn't the rule or the procedure or the ideology, but it's human beings that will make it. Society is made up of groups, and so long as the smaller groups do not have the same rights and the same protection as others—I don't care whether you call it capitalism or communism—it is not going to work. Somehow, the guys in power have to be reached by counter-power, or through a change in their hearts and minds, or change will not come.

**Moyer:** You seem to be one of the few organizations among the poor today which continues to maintain, deliberately and overtly, a philosophy and strategy of non-violence. How do you manage to do this?

**Chavez:** Non-violence is a very powerful weapon. Most people don't understand the power of non-violence and tend to be amazed by the whole idea. Those who have been involved in bringing about change and see the difference between violence and non-violence are firmly committed to a lifetime of non-violence, not because it's easy or because it is cowardly, but because it is an effective and very powerful way.

Non-violence means people in action. People have to understand that with non-violence goes a hell of a lot of organization. We couldn't be non-violent in Salinas and win unless we had a lot of people organized around non-violence up and down the United States and Canada. We are organizers at heart. Most of us in the movement take great pride in being able to put things together.