

A Continuing Conversation With Cesar Chavez 1971

In the November-December 1970 issue, the *Journal* published a conversation with Cesar Chavez. Recently Mr. Chavez spoke in the Riverside Church, New York City. Following the morning service, he answered questions at an informal gathering of about five hundred people. Some of the key questions, with Mr. Chavez' replies, constitute this continuing conversation.

Since Mr. Chavez spoke in Riverside Church, a special fund has been set up by the California Migrant Ministry to help feed the families of workers who are out of work either because of a labor dispute or because of temporary unemployment.

At the time of this printing, the lettuce strike and boycott is still underway although some elements of the dispute appear to be moving toward a solution through negotiation. Meanwhile, the slow process of building a national union of farm workers continues despite almost insurmountable obstacles.

Question: Mr. Chavez, would you say a little bit about the background of the farm workers movement?

Chavez: In 1962 when we started organizing farm workers in Delano, we really were organizing workers all over the state, particularly in those areas where there are many workers. In 1967 we got the first farm workers' contract in the Salinas Valley with a grower who is involved in growing wine grapes. The majority of the workers in Salinas are migratory workers that come across the border of Tijuana and Mexicali and San Luis. So our organization really has two bases—one in Salinas when the workers are there, and it remains there with the lesser number who remain during the winter months; and another base for workers as they go back south and cross the border. We follow them with the organization and we work right at the border.

In the eight years from 1962 until 1970 when the strike started, we went to Salinas (I personally went there no less than five times) to try to keep workers from striking. I asked them to give us enough time to get through with the grape boycott and strike, and then we would take up their cause.

The lettuce workers have grown to be much more militant and more dedicated—not that the grape workers weren't—but they are even more so. There has been more organization, really more basic organization, among the lettuce and the vegetable workers than there was among the grape workers.

Question: Under what type of ordinance was Dow Chemical granted an injunction and exactly what is the interest of that company in lettuce farming?

Chavez: They are using the California Jurisdictional Dispute Act to get an injunction because there is another union involved—the Teamsters Union. They are saying that it's not a strike against the employers but rather a fight among unions—which is not true.

This is the basis, then, for the injunction on the striking and picketing and the boycott. Dow Chemical claims not to be involved. They say that they are not guilty, that they have nothing to do with the lettuce. But the fact is that Dow Chemical owns about 17,000 acres that are farmed by Bud Antle. The fact is that Dow Chemical has a very close business relationship—all the pesticides, the fertilizers and the herbicides that are used by the Bud Antle Company, as well as the polyethelenes used to wrap lettuce, come from Dow Chemical. Dow Chemical has also broken a rule they have for their directors not to belong to outside corporations. In this case, one of Dow Chemical's directors occupies one of five seats in the Bud Antle Company. We're saying that Bud Antle is really a subsidiary of Dow Chemical—a silent subsidiary, but that is enough.

Question: Would you please clarify the nature of the relationship between the Teamsters and the United Farm Workers Union?

Chavez: We have a signed agreement with the Teamsters. It was signed at the beginning of the conflict in Salinas and was really a renewal of a pact that we had signed with them in 1967. It is a mutual assistance pact, and a jurisdictional pact. It recognizes the right of the Farm Workers Union to organize farm workers; it recognizes the right of the Teamsters Union to organize the truck drivers and the processing end of the industry—the canneries and the packing sheds, etc.

Question: Is there a fund to which contributions can be made in order to support the strike?

Chavez: We are the only union in the United States today that does not have a strike fund. We have never had one, and I think the way things are going we will never have one. So all of the striking that is done is done on the basis of extreme sacrifice to the workers. We have an operating fund in which we put the money donated to the union from throughout the country and the world. Out of this fund, we pay the living expenses—the five dollars a week, room and board, gas and telephone, for all of the people working in the movement. There are about 600 of us now. If you would like to donate, we'd be very happy if you contributed to our existing operating fund. All you have to do is send your donations to me in Delano, California—it's a very small town and they know who we are there.

Question: What can people do in order to support the United Farm Workers besides making monetary contributions?

Chavez: I have often said that the boycott is the most powerful, the most potent weapon of non-violence. The longer we live and the more evidence we find, the more convinced we are that *in fact* it is a tremendous weapon to bring about dignity and justice, in this case

for workers. You see, the whole basis of non-violence is having *numbers* of people involved. And it is very difficult to get people involved unless what we ask people to do is very simple, very concrete and very painless. The reason the grape boycott was so effective was because there were liberally millions of people in the United States and in Canada and other parts of the world who were doing something very painless. That was simply not eating grapes and, even more important, one as watching the other! You know, a friend stopping in to visit would open the refrigerator before even saying hello, checking to see if grapes were there. Now, if we can do the same thing with iceberg lettuce, I think we will be in good shape. I think that the most important thing is to begin to get our markets and supermarkets to demand the union label lettuce. It is available, and it has the same label that we have on the grapes—the black Aztec eagle. If you then begin to talk to all of your friends and neighbors, we'll be successful. But you see, all these things take time. Now, if we had a lot of money, we could run a great big campaign throughout the country, and it could be done almost overnight. But since we don't have that, the best way of accomplishing this is like we are doing it now—one to one. If you stop eating iceberg lettuce that does not have the union label, and ask your supermarket managers to show you that the lettuce you buy really is union lettuce, then I think we can go a long way.

Question: You spoke of the increased militancy among the lettuce pickers. Does this have any connection with the bitter and violent struggles of the past in Salinas Valley?

Chavez: The judge who had the injunction ending and banning all picketing and striking was the district attorney who prosecuted—and persecuted—the strikers back in the thirties. So you can see what we are up against. But I think there is more. The reason that the lettuce and vegetable workers are more militant—I don't necessarily mean violent but more militant—is because it is possible now to have a union. The example has been set by the grape workers; so that at every campaign we go to there are more demands and more self-asserting on the part of the workers. Probably it is due to that and also, undoubtedly, to the fact that among the older workers, every single one went through that horrible union-busting operation back in the thirties.

Question: The effectiveness of the grape boycott was dulled somewhat by the heavily increased purchasing of grapes by the Pentagon for consumption by the Army. Were efforts made to halt this? And has similar action been taken by the Pentagon during the lettuce boycott?

Chavez: I am glad that you raised that question because I was forgetting to mention a very important element in the struggle with Bud Antle. The biggest buyer from Bud Antle and Dow Chemical is the U.S. Army. We have the same pattern that we had with the grapes. You see, Dow Chemical and the U.S. Army have had quite a friendship, I understand, for years. They are just continuing that into the salad business! However bad it is, it is probably a lot better than the other things they've been involved in.

In the case of the Army and the armed forces and the increased purchasing of grapes, we just went and told the whole world about it, and also asked our friends to contact their

Congressmen and their Senators. Last year we were on the road for a little over 90 days, visiting something like 90 cities in the United States and Canada. Everywhere I spoke, I asked people to get hold of their Congressmen and make a complaint. And you know, it worked! And I think we can make it work again. If nothing else, it will begin to raise this question of the U.S. Army buying all of its lettuce from Bud Antle. And it will also raise another question. As far as we know, they are not bidding on that lettuce. That means they are using your tax dollar unwisely—not that the Army does not use it unwisely on other things. I think that what happens is this: When we begin to see the employers trying to use their natural friends to beat the boycott, even though it is difficult for us to combat this tactic, it is the best gauge we have that things are going our way.

Question: Mr. Chavez, in my town, Riverhead, New York, there have been organizing problems in a potato-processing plant due to the actions of crew chiefs. Would you please comment on this?

Chavez: The problem of the labor contractor, or what you referred to as the crew chief, is a severe problem in organizing because the growers have these men control the jobs. And if they control the jobs, then they also control the lives of those people who work under them. One of the great arms that the growers have had in keeping us from organizing workers is by using fear—not directly by the grower, but through the labor contractor crew chief—the fear of unemployment on those workers who would otherwise want to be members of the union. The system is even more vicious on the East Coast than it is on the West Coast. The sooner we get through with the struggles in California, the sooner we will be coming here. When we do that, we are going to have to design some very specific approaches to overcome that very, very difficult problem. It's like having a thousand hiring halls on two legs, you know, and recruiting workers not for the benefit of everyone but for the exclusive benefit of one individual. It's a very damaging, very difficult problem to overcome.

Question: Do you think that the lettuce pickers in California are less vulnerable to mechanization, that is automation in the harvesting of crops, than Southern harvesters?

Chavez: They are not less vulnerable to mechanization. In fact, they are very vulnerable to mechanization. Permit me to offer a couple of clarifications. One, the reason that more mechanization is not now active in the fields has nothing to do with the employers' concern for their employees, or the matter of whether or not there are unions in the fields. The simple fact is that they have not come up with the machines to do that job yet. Now, some crops are being mechanized and some will be mechanized completely, but in the majority of these crops the final arbiter—the one who is going to make the final decision—is going to be the American consumer.

Let me explain it this way. When you go to the supermarket, even though you may not *know*, if you were to buy a tomato picked by machine or a tomato picked by hand, nine times out of ten you will choose and buy the tomato picked by hand.

However advanced the machines are, they need a little help from nature. Here's what they do. For instance, in order to get the machines to successfully pick the tomato, the growers have had to go back and come up with different strengths to make the tomato harder. This gives the tomato a harder skin, therefore less water, therefore less flavor. If it weren't for the color, in many cases, you wouldn't be able to tell if you were eating tomato or alfalfa. So the consumer is going to make those decisions!

We are told that they are going to automate strawberries. We know what is going to happen. They are going to have to make them very hard, and I am sure they are going to taste like potatoes—raw potatoes!

But there is a danger that machines are coming in, and we don't know quite how to wrestle with this problem. We do know certain things. We do know that to oppose mechanization is not the right thing to do.

Let me give you a little story to make my point. Right after the Second World War and into the early 50's, there was a story that the General Motors officials conducted a tour for Walter Reuther to see the inventions and the automobiles taking place on the assembly lines. They started at one end of the line and worked themselves all the way to the very last machine. At every step, machines were displacing one man, or five and six and, in some cases totally. In others, partially. When they got to the very end, one of the General Motors officials asked Walter Reuther, "Well, Mr. Reuther, what do you think of our great inventions?" And he said, "You know, it's really amazing. Terrific! These machines do almost everything except one thing—they won't buy cars."

And so *those* machines won't eat strawberries and they won't eat tomatoes and they won't drink wine. You know, there is more automation in the processing end of it than there is in the fields. Once you get off the fields and into the plants, then you have control over it.

We're not giving up the fight, but we're saying very simply that technology should work for the men, for the worker as well as for the employer. We're saying that somehow there has to be an adjustment, and that the fruits of technology should work equally for workers and for employers. Roughly speaking, we say we would like 50% of the profits saved, because the machines should go right back to the workers somehow. But even more than that, we are saying that there ought to be some way, and we've got to find the way, not to neglect those men and women who have made it possible for the employers to have the machines because they worked with their hands while the machines were being developed. We don't have the answers. We've got to seek the answers from the American public.

The employer and the union and the public have a responsibility to work together in solving this problem. It hasn't been successfully solved anywhere that I know of.

But you see, there are some things that can be said for mechanization. One of the things is that we would like to see the profits being made—more food being raised at lesser cost—somehow to feed some of the hungry people in the world. If it means losing a few jobs to do that, I'm for it.