

The United Farm Workers:

A Translation of American Idealism c.1973

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In 1962 a former migrant farm worker, naval veteran of World War II, and past organizer and director of California's Community Service Organization moved his family to a small town in the center of the San Joaquin Valley and began knocking on the doors of the run-down houses of farm workers. As people came to the door he told them that the only way farm workers could gain justice and human dignity was to unite in an organization strong enough to enable them to bargain with their employers. He asked them to help him build such an organization, requested a small contribution of money for operating expenses as a sign of their commitment, and promised them nothing except years of hard work. Many told him to "go to hell." Many more shrugged their shoulders. But every now and then someone would join him in his effort.

The town was Delano. The man was Cesar Estrada Chavez. Today, after ten years of struggle against the most incredible odds, Cesar Chavez is the leader of an organization of more than thirty thousand farm workers who, within the coming year, will hold their founding convention, elect officers, and officially become the first successful union of agricultural workers in the history of this nation. The forces arrayed against this small union are as formidable as ever. Thirty thousand members represent a strong and viable organization, but they are a small percentage of the one million farm workers throughout the country who struggle to gain a living at a time when agriculture has become big business and is steadily replacing people with machines. One state, Arizona, has recently passed a law, which will make it virtually impossible for farm workers to organize. California will vote on a similar law in November. Agricultural interests and related organizations continue to spend millions of dollars each year to discredit Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. When President Nixon took office in 1969, one of his first acts was to instruct his Secretary of Labor to find a way to get farm workers covered under the Taft Hartley part of the National Labor Relations Act, an act from whose benefits farm workers have been specifically excluded by those who continually seek to invoke its penalties.

The issue is simple justice and hinges on one basic question. In a country which was built upon such concepts and ideals as freedom, justice, equality of opportunity, and the recognition of the dignity of human beings, should farm workers have the right to sit down and talk with their employers about such basic issues as wages, housing, and working conditions? For a hundred years they have been told that the answer is "No." They have been told "no" by the people they work for, they have been told "no" by their government.

It is senseless to reiterate here the conditions of exploitation under which farm workers live, the long history of their struggle to escape the bondage of misery, their specific

exclusion from the realization of the dreams and idealism of this nation. All of this has been documented in the volumes of countless government studies and hearings, in thousands of newspaper articles, and in the books of some of our greatest authors. What is important is that Americans come to understand something of the nature of this new union of farm workers, its leader, Cesar Chavez, and the impact of both upon our society. This is particularly important at a time when so much money and effort is being spent by the multi-billion dollar agricultural industry to discredit the union.

What is the union known as "The United Farm Workers"? to begin with, it will not be an official union until the members elect officers at their founding convention during the coming year. The organization, in preparation for this convention, has dropped the phrase "organizing committee" from its official name, however, and in all but the most technical aspects the United Farm Workers can be considered a union with a charter from the AFL-CIO.

Perhaps the most unique thing about this organization of farm workers is its family-like style of life

In its first ten years, UFW has won over two hundred contracts, some of which have been re-negotiated. These contracts provide for wage scales, medical insurance, holidays, vacations, a hiring hall, health and safety precautions ranging from toilet facilities and drinking water to the regulation of the use of dangerous pesticides. The union has a medical insurance plan which has paid out over \$60,000 in benefits to workers, a clinic staffed by nurses and doctors, a life insurance program, a credit union which will lend any member up to \$300 at one percent interest, and a service center which provides services for members in need of help and advice on legal, financial and other matters.

The bulk of the membership in the United Farm Workers comes from California, Arizona, Texas, and Florida, but the union has organizers in more than thirty states and offices in every major city in this country. While the majority of members are black or Mexican-American, its representation includes members of most racial and ethnic groups found in America. Few people remember that the grape strike, which brought national visibility to the movement, was begun by Filipino farm workers who were later joined by Cesar Chavez and his Mexican-American followers.

Members of the United Farm Workers pay dues of three dollars per month, which only partly underwrite the cost of the services provided by the union, the rest coming from contributions by many organizations and individuals. Growers constantly point out that farm workers are forced to pay dues, that on ranches under contract they are confronted with a closed shop, that union members have no say in the conduct of the affairs of the union, and that they do not elect their own officers. The point of such accusation is to demonstrate that UFW is not democratic. It is academic to all but the totally uninformed that dues and a closed shop are essential to the growth and survival of any union and that neither is ever questioned today in other industry except by the most fanatical proponents of "right-to-work" legislation. But the accusation with regard to the un-democratic operation of the union's internal affairs is more serious because few people know the union from the inside.

In a recent issue of *El Malcriado*, the newspaper of the union, members were notified of their right and obligation to vote on a referendum which, among other things, will enable union members to decide whether or not to allow the present leadership to remain in office until the founding convention when new officers will be elected. Until now, Cesar Chavez has been the director of the United Farm Workers *Organizing Committee*. The purpose of an organizing committee is to *organize a union*, and during the basic organizing stage it is essential that the leadership be consistent and continuous. While some may argue that this is not democratic, it has been the basic procedure in the development of every successful union in this country. The organizer must have the loyalty and commitment of his followers until such time as the organization is established.

But let's examine the structure of the United Farm Workers. UFW has a board of directors made up of union members. Every major policy decision is voted upon by the members with lesser decisions being voted on by specific groups of workers, who will be affected (e.g., whether to strike at a given ranch). But the real key to the structure of the union lies in the local ranch committee. Each ranch committee elects its own officers and decides its own program. What is more, each committee appoints a specific person to relate to each of the overall programs of the union. One person is appointed for the sole purpose of seeing to it that the medical plan works for every member of his ranch committee. Another does the same for the credit union; another for the service center. In point of fact, the structure of the union has been specifically devised to decentralize power and spread the act of decision-making as widely as possible throughout the national membership.

Finally, the criticism is levied that farm workers are denied the choice of union representation and that the United Farm Workers are opposed to secret ballot elections for the purpose of deciding who will represent them in labor disputes on specific ranches. One grower from the state of Washington has gone to great lengths and considerable expense to tell the American people that Cesar Chavez is unfair and opposes secret ballot elections for union representation. What he does not tell his audience is that in 1970 a secret ballot election was held on his own ranch and that his workers voted 105-4 to be represented by the United Farm Workers. He then decided that his workers must have made a mistake and has since set up his own company union with his chief foreman in charge. In point of fact, since 1965 over fifty certified, documented elections have been held and, with one exception, the UFW has won each by an overwhelming margin.

Perhaps the most unique thing about this organization of farm workers is its family-like style of life. A visitor to any of the organization meetings or even to the picket line in the midst of a heated struggle is immediately struck, in both cases, by the presence of whole families from the smallest babies to grandfathers. There is much singing, chatting with friends, and a feeling of general closeness even when the most crucial decisions are being made at a meeting or the issues of life and death are being fought out on the picket line. Cesar Chavez takes the family style very seriously as essential to the quality of the life of the organization, but it doubtless would have emerged in any case. Unlike workers in other industries, farm workers have had to take their whole families into the fields to earn enough money to make ends meet, and onto the roads to seek work elsewhere when there

is none locally. It is ironic that the beauty and strength of integrating the whole family into the union should arise from the tragedy of the condition of the workers.

The union has a staff of approximately six hundred people. The number varies from time to time because of the fluid situation. Each staff member, including Cesar Chavez, submits a personal or family subsistence budget to the board of directors. Such a budget will include only those items basic to essential needs of the family or person such as food, clothing, housing, medical expense. Once the budget is approved by the board it is allocated with the addition of five dollars per week spending money for each family member. Mr. Chavez has made it clear that he considers the discipline of such a policy and its uniform application to all members of the staff, including himself, to be essential to the integrity of the union.

This leads us to consider Cesar Chavez himself and the need to “separate the man from the myth.” There are in fact many myths about the man, good and bad, spread abroad by workers and growers. Whatever else may be said about him, he is first and foremost an organizer, probably the best in the country. The basic skill of the organizer lies in his ability to help other people to work together to accomplish something. The very nature of such work provides the organizer himself with very little personal visibility. The reward he receives is often the credit other people get. While Mr. Chavez has been organizing farm workers for many years, it is only very recently that he has become a public figure, a role which he has assumed very well but which he often wishes he could relinquish so that he might return to basic organizing. He was well into his task before he recognized that to complete his work he would have to give up grass roots organizing and assume a leadership role. More than once he has seen younger organizers go out from his office and felt that slight hint of nostalgia.

But basic to being a good organizer are the tangible and intangible qualities that make up a certain kind of person. These vary from person to person and, in the case of Cesar Chavez, might best be described here through a random series of incidents and events experienced by this writer. Three years ago I spoke with a California farm worker who said to me, “Cesar taught me that I am a man, that I am free to make my own decisions and free to make my own mistakes.” I was speaking to this man in Boston where he was organizing New Englanders to support the grape boycott. He and his family had driven all the way from California. They were Mexican-Americans who had spent their lives since they were small children working in the vineyards. They spoke broken English and could not read or write the English language. A few minutes later, Marcus Muños was standing before two thousand white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant churchmen telling them why the farm workers union had meant so much to his family and why he was asking for their support. He was surrounded by young people from the Boston area who had never known a farm worker before but who looked to this man as their leader. Today he is living in the slums of Jersey City doing the same thing for the lettuce boycott—because Cesar Chavez taught him that he was a man!

In the early days of the grape boycott I walked into a meeting of a hundred farm workers in Delano. In the middle of the room a man was sitting on the floor with a bandage on his head. That afternoon he had been beaten by a guard at one of the ranches

where he and others were picketing. Another farm worker had tried to restrain the guard by grabbing him. While the workers sat in this meeting for two hours in absolute silence, Cesar Chavez lectured to them quietly, *not* about the injustice of the beating received by the man with the bandage on his head, but about why it was *wrong* for the other worker to physically attempt to restrain the guard. "If we return the growers' violence with our violence, we will lose," he said.

Viva La Causa

16mm • color • sound • 26 minutes

An outstanding motion picture produced by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, "Viva La Causa" interprets the efforts of transient farm workers to organize and features Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO.

The film—produced, directed, and photographed by Robert Newman—was recently awarded a place on the program of the 26th International Film Festival at Edinburgh, Scotland. It is expected to have wide distribution among church organizations, campuses, unions, civic groups, and similar audiences.

Details on rental or purchase are available through the *Journal* Office of Publication.

Some time later at a meeting of churchmen in New York City, Mr. Chavez was asked, "In the face of all the violence perpetrated on you and the farm worker, how do you manage to remain a non-violent man?" The reply was as remarkable for its perception of human nature as for its integrity. "I am not a non-violent man. I am a violent man who is trying to be non-violent."

On the subject of non-violence, I must recall a conversation I held with Cesar Chavez and which was printed in these pages two years ago (*The Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3). In that conversation he said, "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 brining 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 are organizers at heart. Most of us in the movement take great pride in being able to put things together."

At another meeting with national churchmen, the concern was raised by Mr. Chavez himself about the future of his union. "Even if most of agriculture becomes mechanized," he said, "there will still be enough work for 250,000 workers. That is enough for quite a sizeable union. Some day this union is going to get big. When it does there will be a tendency for it to become corrupt. It always happens. We are glad to have the support of the church now while we are struggling, but I want to know what you in the church can do to keep us honest, to keep us from becoming corrupt." He has expressed this concern

many times in different ways. One of Cesar Chavez's greatest fears is that the union will some day lose the kind of family-like style with which it has grown up.

The place of the family in the movement is very important to him. At a meeting of New York area supporters, which included students, working people, suburban housewives, teachers and others, he made a comment, which once again indicates the depth of his perception of human nature. "When you become involved in a movement such as ours you are going to become a changed person. It is important that you involve your husband or wife at the same time so that they understand why you are changed." Cesar Chavez lecturing middle-class whites on marriage and the family! Yet he has seen the strain that total commitment to a struggle can put upon the family.

One could go on forever describing events such as these. How do you describe Cesar Chavez? One minute he will be immersed in a furious argument with his staff who, when it is over, will defend him with their lives. In the next minute he will be agonizing over how to find the right job for a staff member who is not doing well because he or she is not happy. "There is something everybody likes to do, but sometimes it takes us four years to find it!" A minute later he is in a press conference answering questions he has answered over and over again, patiently trying to explain while his supporters grumble at questions to which the answers should be obvious. He is patient perceptive, persistent, and above all a man who has faith in the goodness of his fellow human beings. As one of his closest associates said recently, "He lets us be completely independent. We go out on our own, blunder into the very mistakes he warned us against, and then he forgives us. The only thing he won't forgive is fooling around when there is work to be done. If a guy fools around, he's out. Period." His faith in human beings extends even to his enemies. "I don't hold anything against the growers," he will say. "I just don't think they understand us. Some day they will understand us, and then we will get along."

Cesar Chavez is not a philosopher who articulates his beliefs and convictions in a system of concepts or a credo. He is a man of action whose basic philosophy of life and deep inner conviction is revealed by what he does, how he treats people in his relationships with them, what those who know him say about him and how they are affected by him. The overwhelming evidence is of a man who believes deeply in the freedom and dignity of man, his right to receive justice and to have the opportunity to live a decent life like any other man.

It may be too early to assess the impact of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers on this nation, but no one can doubt its reality. In some ways this impact is obvious as in the prominence given the lettuce boycott at the Democratic Convention and the presence of "I Eat Lettuce" buttons at the Republican Convention. It has been difficult for any major political candidate to avoid taking a stand with regard to Cesar Chavez. The other obvious impact which this movement has made is with respect to farm workers themselves. Contracts have been won. Conditions are being changed, not widely, but increasingly. People have learned about the conditions of farm workers; the fact that most of them work for big business operations rather than family farms, that farm workers have been killed by pesticides sprayed on the foods which we eat and that the union is changing this, that small farmers are hurt more by pressure of large agribusiness concerns than by a union of farm

workers. People have also learned that some of the biggest farmers in American are the Dow Chemical Company, Tenneco, Purex, the Bank of America, and the Penn Central Railroad. The impact this makes on our nation is direct and obvious.

But the UFW has had a much deeper impact upon this nation, which is not so obvious. Large numbers of people have been changed and motivated by this movement in ways that have implications, which extend far beyond the movement itself or the people it was designed to serve. Cesar Chavez never mobilized people for the purpose of protest or demonstration. He organized people so that they could work together to change a system that was exploiting them. His was not a crowd of people gathered to hear speeches and vent emotions against the evils of this system; his was an organization of people with a strategy for action and a commitment to change a system which runs deep within the political and economic fabric of this nation.

When people become involved in such a movement, something happens to them. Farm workers who had lived their lives in poverty and despair, resigned to the injustices perpetrated upon their families, suddenly discovered that they themselves had the power to do something to change this condition. When a person makes such a discovery he becomes a very different person from the one he was when he was simply bending his back for long hours, resigned to the idea that all he could do was work to survive.

But the union has also organized thousands of other people around this nation who support its cause and involved them in concrete action which has in itself given new meaning to their lives and a new attitude toward their nation. These people come from literally every walk of life in this country: housewives, teachers, students, hard hats, politicians—you name them—some at least are involved. During the grape boycott a few years ago, a retreat was held for boycott leaders in the northeastern United States. It was mid-winter and a slack time for grapes. It would be four months or so before grapes would again be hitting the Eastern markets. The problem was how to keep the support groups alive during this slack period. So teachers, student radicals, labor organizers, and housewives sat around tables in small groups discussing the question of what turns people on and keeps them motivated. What other movement has brought these hitherto diverse groups together with a common concern?

It could well be argued that the farm workers movement is the most important thing happening in America today. Rather than talking about change, the movement has involved people in the process of creating change. No other movement in our nation's history has developed such a broad base of support from so many diverse groups of people. But what is even more remarkable is the form in which this support is given: more often in the form of personal commitment than anything else. This is no accident. Cesar Chavez is a man who believes that people can work together to build a just society for everyone, that there is a job for everyone to do, that people can and should be motivated, that people should be treated with respect and given the freedom and opportunity to build decent lives and live with dignity. This is the kind of idealism on which this country was founded, and today Cesar Chavez is the leader of a movement which is a very real translation of that idealism.