

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WALT BURTON AND BOB FITCH

Last year Cesar Chavez and his United Farm Workers union won the strike for California grape pickers. Now he is asking consumers to boycott lettuce not picked by his union. A priest who has worked with the movement explains Chavez and his cause.

By Rev. John Bank

cesar chavez

—WHAT HE NOW WANTS FOR FARM WORKERS





A major health concern for field workers is pesticide control.

Thousands of them experience daily symptoms of pesticide poisoning.

When a court ordered an end to the lettuce strike, Chavez appealed to the public, through such national forums as the "Today" show, for a boycott of non-UFWOC lettuce.





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hat are we to think of Cesar Chavez? A special U.S. Bishops committee serves as mediator in the grape strike. The California Franciscans loan him money to finance the lettuce strike, but a Salinas, California, judge throws him in jail for refusing to call off the lettuce boycott. *St. Anthony Messenger* presents him with a plaque for positive moral leadership, but the *Twin Circle* sharply criticizes him for misleading the public. The *New York Times* says he is as dedicated to non-violence as Mahatma Gandhi, but *American Opinion*, organ of the John Birch Society, accuses Chavez of promoting violence. David Frost endorses Chavez's cause with a second interview on his national TV show, while James J. Kilpatrick condemns Chavez with newspaper and radio commentary.

Is Chavez a ruthless labor boss bent on a power grab or a sincere leader of oppressed farm workers striving to vindicate their rights? Many times, as a priest associated with Chavez and the United Farm Workers, I've been asked by sincere but puzzled people what they should believe about Chavez. What kind of man is he? What does he want for farm workers? Is the boycott a necessary and justified means?

I settled any doubts I had about Chavez long ago. At first I read all I could about him from respected national magazines. One day while giving a day of recollection for sisters in Cleveland, I went looking for one of Chavez's boycott co-ordinators, and a vice-president of the United Farm Workers, Julio Hernandez. I expected to find a slick, Chicano organizer—a clever man with public relations skills. Instead I found a field worker who had spent 25 years picking grapes and was now struggling to convince a city of 775,000 not to eat grapes. In very broken English, he asked me to help him. I said I would.

My decision to help with the grape boycott prompted me to make a fact-finding trip to Delano, California. I talked with growers and their public relations' directors, workers and union leaders, gas station attendants, newspaper reporters, dentists, shopkeepers and clergy. I saw Chavez in the turmoil of his office, in the openness of his small home with his wife Helen and eight children; I shared coffee and rolls with him late at night in a Delano restaurant. I was certain that he was a good and honest man.

After close involvement with Chavez in the hard, uncertain moments of the grape boycott, in last summer's victory, in the white-heat of the lettuce strike, I am all the more convinced of his integrity. My commitment to the justice of *la causa*—to Chavez's goal of gaining a more humane standard of living for our nation's farm workers—last June motivated me to temporarily leave my pastoral work in the Youngstown Diocese, with my Bishop's permission, to work full-time with the United Farm Workers. I consider this very priestly work. For in talking of the priestly ministry, Vatican II states the special claim the poor have on the priest's service. In the cause of the farm workers, the priest can help destroy the roots of their poverty—their lack of organization. The priest helps them claim rights defended by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and promoted by every pope since him.

Probably of the most immediate concern to people I meet is the lettuce boycott. Even most of the grape-boycott

supporters were surprised that another boycott was called so soon. Opponents of the cause charge that success has gone to Chavez's head. Followers wonder if the lettuce boycott is unwise.

The events that brought Cesar Chavez to Salinas and the lettuce strike are not complicated. As the grape growers of Delano were signing contracts at the end of the five-year strike and boycott, Chavez sent telegrams to the vegetable growers of the Salinas Valley, the Santa Maria Valley and the Imperial Valley. Since farm workers are not included under the National Labor Relations Act and have no recourse to the machinery of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), Chavez asked the growers for a voluntary election procedure to enable the field workers to express freely their choice of unions.

The growers' response was to quickly make contact with the Teamsters union. Within five days after receiving Chavez's telegram, 70 growers signed contracts with the Western Conference of Teamsters. (Cal Watkins of United Fruit, Salinas Valley's largest lettuce grower, testified in court that the growers sought out the Teamsters the same day they received Chavez's telegram—July 23). Soon nearly 200 whirlwind contracts had been signed. In no instance were the workers consulted; nor were they given their right to ratify the contracts. They found out about their unilateral and instant unionization by reading the newspapers.

Since the contracts offered only a dime more per hour than the non-union wage and provided no protection from pesticides, the field workers called them "sweetheart contracts." Their right of self-determination through a union of their choice had been violated, their plans trampled on. Their anger was summed up at a rally when Cesar Chavez said: "The day is over when two anglos can sign a contract for us on the back of a valentine." Their response on August 24 was the only alternative the growers had left open for them, the salad bowl strike.

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was with the farm workers when they struck. Later, on a cold September morning Chavez asked me to join the lettuce strikers at the Hansen ranch in Salinas, California. Hired guards had fired guns to intimidate the workers who walked in front of the ranch entrances with their red and black strike flags. About 10 o'clock a panel truck roared along the road. It skidded in the dirt entrance a few feet from where I stood quietly talking with the strikers. Stenciled black letters on the white sides of the truck read *California Guard Dogs*. Inside the truck, the dogs snarled and lunged at the metal gratings. I turned to a worker and asked, "What do you think the dogs are for?" He said with amazing good humor, "To eat the lettuce."

He was not afraid to claim his rights. Thousands of farm workers like him are no longer afraid. This diminishing of decades of fear is Cesar Chavez's greatest achievement. It is what he wants first for the nation's three million farm workers.

In the salad bowl strike, as in the grape strike, farm workers laid claim to their right to bargain collectively through a union of their choice. Immediately some growers reached for the legal weapons that would rout the workers.

On September 16, 1970, in the middle of the harvest in the Salinas Valley, in the middle of the strike, Monterey

contract for us on the back of a valentine.”

County Judge Anthony Brazil of Salinas ordered an end to strike activities. This court action against the farm workers forced Chavez to call for a boycott of those lettuce growers who were disregarding the will of their workers. Six large growers—Inter Harvest, Freshpict, D'Arrigo Bros., Meyers, Brown & Hill and Pick-n-pack obtained cancellations of their contracts from the Teamsters and gave their workers a chance to choose which union they wanted. The workers overwhelmingly chose the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). New contracts were then signed with UFWOC and ratified by the workers.

Other growers then took further court action against the farm workers' lettuce boycott. The Monterey County court in Salinas ordered Chavez to call off the nationwide boycott of non-union lettuce.

When he refused, Chavez was held in contempt of court and jailed until he cancelled the boycott. Earlier Chavez's lawyers had appealed as unconstitutional the injunction to call off the boycott. They were told to post a \$2.75 million bond before the appeal could be heard. Chavez and his struggling union didn't have the money.

Chavez chose to take his case to the arena of public opinion. (He chose confrontation—one of his most effective ways of drawing farm workers out of fear-inspired inaction.) He disregarded the injunction in a spirit of civil disobedience. On December 4, Cesar Chavez was jailed in Salinas.

Three thousand farm workers were at the courthouse with Chavez the Friday he went to jail. The brown-skinned men, scarred with years of stooped labor in the sun, came from every farm community in California from Calexico to Napa.

These farm workers had marched with Chavez from the union headquarters to the courthouse. For nearly four hours the men, women, and children stood, sat and knelt in the courtyard and in the hallways on all three floors of the courthouse while Chavez's hearing went on.

They improvised a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, placing the gold and brown statue on a flower-laden truck, and began a round-the-clock vigil at the Monterey County jail.

“We'll be here as long as Cesar's in there,” a farm worker keeping vigil said. They carried the black Aztec eagle union flag and signs that said “Libertad Por Chavez/ Freedom For Chavez.”

Across the nation, supporters of the farm workers' cause defended Chavez. Mrs. Ethel Kennedy visited Chavez in jail a few days after his sentence, amid the jeers of demonstrating supporters of the growers. Mrs. Kennedy was later praised by the National Coalition of American Nuns for her defense of the migrant workers. The organization asked Roman Catholic institutions to boycott non-union lettuce. Mrs. Coretta Scott King also visited the imprisoned Chavez.

In Los Angeles, Citizens for Chavez began selling bumper stickers that read *WE LIKE CESAR (CHAVEZ) SALAD*. In New York City, supporters picketed the House of Bud, a wholesale outlet for Salinas Valley grower Bud Antle, who obtained the injunction against the lettuce boycott.

A *New York Times* editorial began: “The imprisonment of Cesar Chavez, leader of the California lettuce strikers, is an exercise in legalism of the kind that serves only to discredit the law. Mr. Chavez, as firm in his dedication to non-violence as Mahatma Gandhi, is a symbol of emancipation for the most exploited of the nation's workers, the agricultural laborers.”

After 20 days of imprisonment, two days before Christ-

mas, the California Supreme Court ordered Chavez's release in defense of his right of appeal.

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s the growers' recourse to legal maneuvers stalls and the lettuce boycott grows more effective, some people in Salinas intensify their use of an old tactic employed against Chavez in the grape strike. They red-bait him. Bumper stickers are distributed that read *REDS LETTUCE ALONE*. Letters to the editor continually speak of Chavez as if he were Cuban trained and conspiring to control and strangle the food supply of the nation through the formation of a nationwide agricultural union.

(This kind of absurd thinking reveals a great lack of reality, since the food supply of the nation is already in the hands of unions with no threat to the country. Seventy per cent of all food in the U.S. is shipped by truck and in that sense controlled by the Teamsters International union. Food processing plants have been unionized since the 30's even though their opponents charged that they would control the nation's food supply and attempted to have food processing workers excluded from the National Labor Relations Act.)

The strike has produced numerous paid ads in the *Salinas Californian* attacking Chavez. Some Salinas citizens have misused the American flag, making it a sign of opposition to the strike, flying it from cars, lettuce trucks, offices, struck fields and private homes. This action has deeply offended all the strikers who see it as streaked with racism toward the Mexican-American strikers. It is particularly abrasive to those strikers who fought for the flag in the last three wars.

The red-baiting activities in John Steinbeck's hometown of Salinas were reminiscent of opposition to union organizing in the Salinas Valley 30 years earlier. The same judge whose decision last September crippled the farm workers' strike, had, as a law enforcement official 30 years ago, deputized every white adult male to arrest the participants in a union-organizing drive. The scene was graphically described by Steinbeck in his novel, *In Dubious Battle*. Steinbeck quotes a grower as saying, “A Communist, mister, is any ——— who wants 35 cents an hour when I'm paying a quarter.”

Chavez himself dismisses the charges saying, “If I went around the country defending myself against the irresponsible and totally unfounded charges of Communism, I would be wasting time that I must use creatively for the betterment of farm workers.”

Since the grape strike set off a nationwide controversy, Cesar Chavez's personal history has been a matter of public record. Nearly a hundred articles have appeared about him and his work in respected national magazines. Of the published books about *la causa*, two give Chavez's background in detail—*Delano* by John Gregory Dunne (Noonday Press) and *Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution* by Peter Matthiessen (Random House).

All of these responsible sources tell the same story. Cesar Chavez was born on March 31, 1927, in Yuma, Arizona. When his family of seven lost their small farm there in the depression, he moved with them to California. He was 10. The family worked as migrant farm workers throughout the state. The poverty of their lives forced Chavez out of school in the seventh grade. He had attended

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37 different schools.

A key person in his continued informal education was Father Donald McDonnell. From him Chavez learned about the Church's social teaching and the California labor scene. In 1952 Father McDonnell gave Chavez's name to Fred Ross, an organizer for Community Service Organization (CSO). Ross found Chavez picking apricots in San Jose. For 10 years Cesar Chavez worked with CSO, getting Spanish-speaking people to register to vote, helping them organize their way out of poverty. When he left the organization to form a farm workers' association in 1962, he was national director of CSO.

Many people who red-bait Chavez make much of the fact that CSO was started by Saul Alinsky, a community organizer famous among the poor of Chicago as a principal architect of the Back-of-the-Yards Neighborhood Council. By training, Alinsky is a sociologist and criminologist. A California priest said, "Most of the people who link Chavez to Alinsky as a pupil to professor know absolutely nothing about Saul Alinsky, except that he has a name that sounds like a bomb thrower. They know less about the excellent work CSO did for the Spanish-speaking of California in initiating them into the democratic process."

The fact that the Senate factfinding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities submitted a report on Chavez to the 1967 California legislature is sometimes used as propaganda against him. Those who promote such propaganda fail to read the conclusions of that report, which vindicate Chavez from irresponsible charges of Communism.

Major sources of anti-Chavez propaganda are the John Birch Society, *Twin Circle* (whose editorializing against the grape boycott last summer brought a reprimand from the U.S. Bishops Committee on the Farm Labor Dispute), the Farm Bureau, grower associations and spontaneous organizations formed by the growers being struck. During the grape strike, the growers set up a special organization, the South Central Farmers Committee in Delano. Enlisting the services of the Whitaker-Baxter Public Relations Agency of San Francisco, the grape growers established another source of information on the grape strike, the Consumers' Rights Committee, with a Washington, D.C., address. In the current lettuce strike, growers led by Daryl Arnold have formed the Free Marketing Council of Los Angeles. The organization was formed at a meeting of lettuce growers in Englewood, California, on September 22, 1970, five days after Chavez began the boycott.

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rom opposition sources like these and from some columnists come the charge that Cesar Chavez is forcing farm workers into a union against their will—compulsory unionism. The reality is quite the opposite. Farm workers want a union. Every time the California growers have given farm workers the chance to choose between Chavez's United Farm Workers, another labor union, or no union, the workers have overwhelmingly voted for UFWOC. UFWOC has the proud claim of winning every election. This is no surprise to those who know the history of California. For nearly a century farm workers have struggled to form a union.

Compulsory unionism is not the issue here. To the contrary, *compulsory non-unionism* is a long standing tradition among the California growers.

Not far from Lamont, California, stands an old, square-shaped building in the middle of a barren field. On the front face of the building, above the double doors, is printed: Farm Workers Union, Local #218, AFL. Bertha Rankin, a local grower at the time of the Dust Bowl migration into the valley, sympathized with the farm workers and built the union hall for them. But other growers soon crushed their organizing effort.

Almost every farming center in California has its history of broken strikes. One of the most bitter agricultural strikes occurred in Fillmore and Santa Paula in 1941. This strike was crushed by the Associated Farmers, the Farm Bureau and the state Chamber of Commerce. One of the reporters on the scene during the 1941 strike was George Meany, now the president of AFL-CIO. He wrote an article on the Ventura citrus strike entitled "Peonage in California" (*American Federationist*, May 1941) that described the oppression and abuse suffered by the strikers.

Statistics indicate the need of farm workers for a union. Nationwide their average annual income for a family of four is \$2,700, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (1970). This same department estimates that if farm worker wages were doubled and the full increase passed on to the consumer, he would pay only a penny or two more for a head of lettuce or a stalk of celery. (UFWOC asked for only a one-fifth increase in wages.)

The Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor (1970) found over 800,000 children under 16 years old working in the fields to help support their families. The U.S. Public Health Service estimates that while other Americans can look forward to over 70 years as a life expectancy, the farm workers' life expectancy is only 49 years. Maternal mortality and child mortality at birth are both 120 per cent higher for farm workers than the national average. Influenza and pneumonia run 200 per cent higher than the national rate. Tuberculosis and other infectious diseases run 260 per cent higher. The accident rate for farm workers is 300 per cent higher than for other U.S. workers.

For the service of feeding America, farm workers have received in return the lowest wages, the most miserable and hazardous working conditions and shorter life spans than anyone else. And all this from a nation that has just celebrated a trillion dollar economy.

Farm workers see the ever increasing distance between them and all other workers in terms of wages and working conditions. Other workers have the machinery of the National Labor Relations Act to obtain union recognition. Passed in 1935, this landmark bill deliberately excluded farm workers. Proponents of the act, including its author, then Senator Robert Wagner, admitted that to include farm workers would have jeopardized the passage of the act, so strong was the farmers' lobby.

Thirty-six years later, instead of being able to petition the NLRB for free elections that would bind both workers and growers, farm workers are left at the mercy of the growers' willingness to talk with them and recognize their union. When the growers refuse dialogue, farm workers have only one way of ensuring their rights. They must strike and extend their strike through a boycott.

Before every strike and boycott, Chavez has asked growers—individually and collectively—to agree to free elections. With only a handful of exceptions these elections were refused by both grape and lettuce growers. In every case elections were held, farm workers freely chose to be represented by UFWOC over the Teamsters or over no union at all.

Sometimes the charge of compulsory unionism arises

A family of four averages an income of \$2,700 a year.

because of the "union shop" requirement that workers join the union seven days after employment. Yet the workers know that their union, like the building trades unions and many others must be a "union shop" in order to work at all. Otherwise workers would be tempted to enjoy the benefits of union contracts without accepting the responsibility of membership.

One of Chavez's top priorities is health programs for farm workers. These cost the growers 10¢ per man-hour—far below what other employers pay for their employees' health benefits. The latest, the Robert F. Kennedy Farm Workers Medical Plan, effective June 1, 1970, provides that for every 250 hours the union member works he earns three months of benefits. These include payments toward doctor and hospital expenses, X-ray and lab tests, and medicine for each member of a farm worker's family. If the worker works only 50 hours under union contract, he would still earn three months of benefits that cover doctor visits, X-ray and lab tests, and medicine for family members.

For four years the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee medical team has been working out of converted house trailers and whatever space they could find to provide limited medical care to migrant and seasonal farm workers. Next month UFWOC will open the new Rodrigo Terronez Memorial Clinic. It is named in memory of a 32-year-old farm worker and union leader who died in an emergency room in 1966, after being injured in an auto accident. Reportedly, the doctor treating Terronez refused to do a tracheotomy because "His neck is too fat . . . and besides . . . he's going to die anyway."

The new medical clinic is needed to prevent discrimination and neglect and to serve the expanded Kennedy Medical Plan. The table grape victories in Delano and volunteer staffing have made its funding possible.

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arion Moses, R.N., the clinic administrator, emphasized: "Our objective is to develop a system which can serve as a model of what quality medical care for the poor can and should be. Our plan is a hope and a beginning. If we succeed in Delano, we can then duplicate our efforts in other areas of the state that have large concentrations of farm workers."

A major health concern for field workers is pesticide control. Testifying before the House of Representatives on October 3, 1969, Chavez said: "The health and safety of farm workers in California and throughout the United States is the single most important issue facing the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. In California the agricultural industry experiences the highest occupational disease rate. . . . Growers consistently use the wrong kinds of economic poisons [pesticides] in the wrong amounts in the wrong places in reckless disregard of the health of their workers in order to maximize profits. Advancing technological changes in agriculture have left the industry far behind in dealing with the occupational hazards of workers which arise from the use of economic poisons."

Each year in California an estimated 3,000 children receive medical attention after having ingested pesticides. There are over 300 cases of serious nonfatal poisonings annually in California.

According to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (1969), an estimated 800 people a year are fatally poisoned by pesticides throughout the country. Thousands

of farm workers experience daily symptoms of pesticide poisoning which include dermatitis, rashes, eye irritations, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, excess sweating, headaches, double vision, dizziness, skin irritations, difficulty in breathing, loss of fingernails, nervousness, insomnia, bleeding noses and diarrhea.

Dr. Irma West, who works in the state Department of Public Health, has written many articles on the hazards of pesticides for farm workers. The following is just one case from hundreds of similar incidents.

On a large California ranch in the fall of 1965 a group of Mexican-American workers and their families were picking berries. None could understand or read English. A three-year-old and her four-year-old brother were playing around an unattended spray rig next to where their mother was working. The four-year-old apparently took the cap off a gallon can of 40 per cent tetraethyl pyrophosphate (TEPP, a phosphate ester cholinesterase inhibitor) pesticide left on the rig. His sister put her finger in it and sucked it. She vomited immediately, became unconscious, and was dead on arrival at the hospital where she was promptly taken. TEPP is the most hazardous of all pesticides in common use in agriculture in California. The estimated fatal dose of pure TEPP for an adult is one drop orally or one drop dermally.

TEPP is banned in all UFWOC contracts. All contracts signed by the United Farm Workers contain a health and safety section that establishes a Union Health and Safety Committee to formulate policies for the use of economic poisons, protective garments, materials, tools and equipment insofar as they affect the health and safety of workers and sanitary conditions. Certain hard pesticides are totally barred. For example, UFWOC's contract with Inter Harvest, the nation's number one lettuce grower, states: "2,4-D, 2,4-5T, DDT, DDD, ALDRIN, DIELDRIN, and ENDRIN shall not be used."

Such hard pesticides are harmful not only to field workers but also to consumers. Many pesticides, not water-soluble, cannot be washed off the fruit or vegetable and so build up within the fatty tissues of our bodies. Ecologists are also gathering extensive evidence on the danger of pesticides and herbicides for the environment. Chavez's contribution here has been recognized. In the *Environmental Handbook* published for Earth Day last April, one article, "Since Silent Spring," singles out the UFWOC as the only agency working effectively to control pesticides. Union contracts promoted by Chavez are banning pesticides and herbicides still used on some lettuce fields in the Salinas Valley, but prohibited in Vietnam.

The cause of self-determination for field workers precludes Chavez, or any other person alone, choosing new targets and running campaigns singlehandedly. When workers themselves get together and ask for Chavez and the United Farm Workers, he will respond. It looks as if the citrus fields of California will be next. That campaign may also involve the citrus workers of Florida, whose plight was brought to painful attention last summer by Chet Huntley's *Migrant—An NBC White Paper*.

Wherever Chavez goes, the odds will likely be against him. The justice he seeks for farm workers is often invisible to those blinded by prejudice or vested interests. One objective observer, Norman Lewis, a British journalist writing for the London *Times* (whose readers can take pride in the formation of the first British agricultural workers' union in 1872), celebrates Chavez's approach. In February 1970, Lewis wrote: "Cesar invites you, soft of eye and voice, to share his boundless amazement at the wrongs practiced on defenseless field workers—and you do." □