

Cesar Chavez Was Called

In 1962, Cesar Chavez founded his National Farm Workers Association and adopted the thunderbird eagle as its logo. The purpose of the NFWA, as it was called, was to organize farmworkers so that one day – Chavez himself estimated 20 years – growers would be forced to share power with their workers by sitting down at the same table to negotiate wages, benefits, and working conditions. It would be this power-sharing, Chavez preached, that would ultimately ensure the dignity of farmworkers and provide them with political clout and civic status.

Forty-three years later, I still marvel at the incredible audacity of Chavez's undertaking, the complete confidence he exhibited in himself to achieve his goals, and his decision to forgo all earthly possessions as a sign of his personal commitment. This man, Cesar Chavez, the bread-winning father of eight children, with little formal education and no financial resources, left a good-paying job to pursue his idealistic dream of forcing the largest industry in California – and the most virulently anti-union – to share power with its immigrant farmworkers. By any standard of measurement, this is simply amazing and borders on the absurd. Is there anyone reading this essay in 2005 who would judge such a decision to be rational, or accept it from one's own children or parents? I don't think so; it would more likely be judged as a sad case of a misguided do-gooder "going off the deep end."

On its face, the sheer economic size and the political influence of such an anti-union industry would seem to preclude any hope of achieving such improbable goals. California agribusiness, the state's largest industry, had enjoyed a 50-year history of successfully crushing union attempts to organize farmworkers by using local police agencies to arrest strikers, browbeating judges to impose jail sentences, fomenting anti-communist smear campaigns against union leaders, importing untold hundreds of strikebreakers, and flooding the labor market with bracero-type foreign worker programs. The financial strength and political clout of local growers, along with their affiliated businesses in the Central Valley agricultural heartland of California, controlled local law enforcement agencies, county courts, politicians, newspapers, school boards, mainline churches, and the chambers of

commerce. These agribusiness growers provided the jobs and controlled the local economy; they were untouchable.

And the table grape industry – the specific target of Chavez’s strike campaign, ever after referred to as the Delano Grape Strike – was itself huge. The strike area covered 350,000 acres, more than 400 square miles, and extended from Ducor on the north to Arvin on the south, a distance of 70 miles. More than 30 table grape growers were targeted. An impossible and even misguided campaign, it seemed to many knowledgeable outside observers of the day. (One of the reasons Chavez targeted the table grape industry was the number of year-round hand-labor cultivation operations required: pruning, tying, leafing, thinning, tipping, irrigating, fertilizing, harvesting, etc.)

Visualize this example: if California farmworkers stacked end-to-end the 95 million 20-pound boxes of table grapes that were harvested, this wall of boxes would be 12 high – six feet in height – and extend from Delano, California, to Boston, Massachusetts, a distance of 2,500 miles. And if the wholesale value of the grapes averaged only a dollar per pound, the cash value of this grape crop would reach \$2 billion. And if each box of grapes required three separate harvest operations – picking, packing, and swamping – farmworkers would have logged a total of 285 million hand-labor operations during the harvest season alone. As large as these numbers appear, be reminded that the table grape industry is only a fraction of the total value of California agribusiness.

(For the sake of personal convenience, I have used 2004 statistics. Of course, the actual numbers would have been less in 1965, but the proportions would be the same.)

The California table grape industry had been built at the expense of cheap, imported foreign labor – Filipinos, Mexicans, Arabs – and impoverished migrant workers of all colors. Workers housed in camps, driven by bus to remote fields, working long hours supervised by crew pushers, without access to bathroom facilities, and only the use of a dirty cup to drink from a common water barrel by the side of the road. Workers were paid at the industry’s “going rate,” that is, the rate determined by agribusiness employers in each crop-growing area, depending on the size of the farm labor pool available for the work at hand. All work was paid by the hour or by piece-rate (the faster you worked, the more you earned), and each job was day-to-day

with no job security. If there was no work, there was no pay. Farmworkers were not protected by state and federal labor laws, were not eligible for unemployment insurance, and because of substandard wages, children worked alongside their parents to contribute to the family income. If there were child labor laws, they did not apply to California agriculture.

In the face of these punishing realities, what on earth could Cesar Chavez have been thinking when he made his irrevocable decision to organize farmworkers into a union strong enough to force California growers to share power with their immigrant workers? Why did he believe he could accomplish something when for 40 years or more, all others had failed?

It defies human explanation, but I believe this to be true: for the sake of others, some people are called, inspired, and anointed to undertake seemingly hopeless and impossible causes – and they manage to succeed. Cesar Chavez was one of those specially called persons.

