

Chatfield's Account of the ALRA Passage 1975

Jacques Levy, author of *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* came to Sacramento in February of 1994 to interview me for a future book. Almost 10 years later, in December of 2003, he sent two excerpts from his yet-unpublished book for me to review and acknowledge the accuracy of my quotes. The working title for Levy's future book is *Cesar Chavez's Guide to a Just Society*. Unfortunately, I must report that Jacques Levy passed away before he finished his book.

I print these two excerpts here in their entirety. The quotes are mine but the commentary packaging the quotes belongs to Levy. The passage of the ALRA in 1975 marked the end of my active involvement with Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement.

“During that period there was intense jockeying. LeRoy Chatfield, a former Christian Brother who for years had been one of Cesar's top lieutenants, had run Brown's Northern California campaign, then joined his staff. Using techniques he learned with the UFW, Chatfield orchestrated multiple meetings of key groups with the governor. ‘The idea was to create momentum to the point where there had to be legislation,’ he explained. He rounded up representatives of growers, religious groups, labor, and minority organizations, all invited to private meetings with the governor in Sacramento.

‘I remember one occasion we had four different meetings going on in the governor's office at the same time, and Brown was shuttling from faction to faction,’ Chatfield said. ‘Some of these meetings took place at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. These things went on for hours and hours and hours and hours.’

‘You have to appreciate Brown's intellectual ability in this,’ Chatfield commented. ‘He did nothing for weeks except this, and he actually became completely versed in the nuances of the language. I'm talking about over commas, over words. This is not a person just interested in overview. He considered it a personal challenge.’

Chatfield said Brown spent so much time on the issue, ‘his chief of staff, Gray Davis, (who later also became California governor), practically got into a fight with me because I was monopolizing Brown, his interests, and his time. Gray felt threatened about my involvement, in effect taking his position as chief of staff. I mean he was very, very angry about it.’

Chatfield admitted he felt torn between loyalty to the governor and the union. ‘I saw that if I was helpful to Brown, if he pulled it off, this was his platform to the future. But I wasn't that loyal to Brown that I was willing to hide harmful things from the Farm Workers. That was just not part of me at that point.

‘The growers weren't in the governor's office because they wanted to be,’ explained LeRoy Chatfield. ‘What they saw in Jerry Brown was a way to get a bill that would tame Cesar in this guerilla war. There were less concerned about what was in the legislation than I thought they would have been. Sure they wanted the boycott outlawed and they wanted some key things which they thought they got, but they could no longer continue to operate their industry the way it was going.’

‘They didn’t believe that Cesar would accept legislation. Why would he? He was winning,’ Chatfield said.

‘So that was part of the governor’s power over the growers. “I can deliver Cesar’s approval of a bill.” If he were a conservative Republican, the growers would know he couldn’t deliver Cesar. But he was a liberal Democrat, who identified with Cesar. Therefore, if Brown said he could deliver Cesar, they were hoping he could.

‘I’m not saying that they were just rolling over and playing dead,’ Chatfield continued, ‘but this bill had plenty to protect the rights of growers, otherwise you couldn’t get it by the legislature. The question is how much did it tilt to the protection of farm workers, and the fact is it tilted a lot.’

Chatfield years later would recall the scene. ‘Brown is the ringmaster. It was midnight or 12:30 when the final telephone call was made to Cesar. You had legislators and growers sitting in the room, attorneys, Cohen and myself, Rose Bird, all these groups. It was a packed house. There must have been thirty, forty people there, sitting on chairs, on couches, on the floor. Brown had his desk at the front and this phone put in.

‘The growers and a lot of legislators there are absolutely convinced that Cesar is going to nix the deal. They had already been on record with us that if there were going to be changes in the legislation the deal was off. But Brown too didn’t want any changes because he knew that the thing would unravel.

‘Then Cesar came on the speaker phone,’ Chatfield continued, ‘and Brown briefed him, not in terms of the legislation but where we were and who was there. Of course this made Brown look very powerful because here he was talking firsthand to the nemesis of all these people. Brown told him everything was ready to go, that he had seen the bill and that his people had signed off on it. Then he sort of built it up, “Well, Cesar, what do you say?”

‘There was this big pregnant pause, I mean, a long pause,’ Chatfield recalled. ‘You know how Cesar gets. He sort of feels sick, his voice gets real thin, and so this big pause.

Finally Cesar answered. He would agree to it, he said, but only under one condition. The growers leaned forward in their chairs, holding their breath. Cesar’s condition was blunt. He would agree, he said quietly, only if not one comma were changed. The room exploded in applause.

‘Everyone was shaking their head in agreement,’ Chatfield explained, ‘Because no one wanted any changes. They felt they had been through the ringer for too long, and this was it. It was all or nothing. It was a dramatic, historical moment.’”