

CESAR CHAVEZ INTERVIEW - (Audio Only)

Wayne State University, Archives of Labor and Union Affairs

00:00:37 Well, it's been a long time, um, I started organizing about almost 20 years ago, and uh, I got interested in community organization as a way of trying to solve my workers' problems. I was working in the farms and uh, there was a group in California called the Community Service Organization which was beginning to organize Mexican-American people for effective uh, uh, political work, non-partisan political work, uh, voter registration, we didn't care who people voted for as long as they exercised their right. And we did a lot of lobbying trying to get legislation passed and took of a lot of the issues that minority groups had been confronted with and concerned with, like uh, police brutality and uh, uh, oh, discrimination in jobs and services.

01:46 And uh, I got interested in the group through a priest uh, that I knew, a few months after I uh, joined the group I was offered a job to become a full time organizer. I didn't know anything about organizing and uh, didn't know anything about meetings, had never belonged to a group before, this was my first experience. And I was very frightened, because I didn't know if I could do the job, but I was very interested at the same time. At that time I was working at a farm near San Jose, California, and uh, I was getting about, I think in those days we were getting about uh, 48 cents an hour. I came home, I told my wife that I had been approached and they were going to give me \$30. a week, which was about as much money as I got working the farm, but, it was much more exciting.

02:48 So I began trying to organize, and uh, started really from zero, cause I didn't know anything about organizing, and uh, paid very close attention to what uh, the

man I was working with, uh, how he did it, and didn't miss a chance to try to keep working with him and observing. And, I became very engrossed in all sorts of organizing and I learned quite a bit, learned that, uh, there are no short cuts, and there are no miracles, and there's no magic in organizing, there's just a lot of patience and a lot of hard work. And, uh, we had to like it, you can't do it if you don't like it, because it becomes uh, after a while it becomes very uh, difficult if you don't like to work with people because, uh, lot of responsibility in organizing. If you go around preaching, telling people that things can be done, they begin to deposit their problems with you and expect you to do something for them.. They have to be, it calls on an awful lot of your own determination to do things for them.

04:20 And uh, so I learned that, organizing really basically means uh, talking to people one at a time, you can't organize by just talking to everybody. And then you don't organize through leaflets or through the radio. To have effective organizing you have to just, talk to one at a time and, uh that's the approach that I've used, and of course everyone that I talk to I try to get them to be an organizer themselves, in other words, the whole question of multiplying one's work.

04:55 So uh, the first thing I asked when I joined this group was uh, what is this group going to do for farm workers? And I was told, well, this is the Community Service Organization, if it ever gets strong enough, its going to help farm workers. So I stayed with it for, about 12 years, and uh, they weren't moving towards the farm workers that much. They were involved in many things in the fringes, but they weren't directly involved in organizing in the unions. So about six years after I joined the group I became the executive director of the whole organization, which was a national organization, with chapters in the southwestern states. And I began to make demands that we go into a full-scale organizing drive among farm

workers. Finally, they rejected the idea of organizing unions. So I left the group, and uh, I was in, in the main office in Los Angeles.

06:11 And I went, took my wife and my eight kids and uh, quit the job and went to Delano where uh, my wife was born and where I met her and we got married and so forth. We returned back to Delano and uh, then we began to organize without any support from anyone. Uh, I would work uh, a day or two in the fields, and then use the money for gas and for uh, to buy materials, that and gas was the real, and then my wife would work with me and then uh. Then later on I couldn't continue organizing because the pressure of organizing was too much and I couldn't do both, and she stayed working in the fields to support all of us and I then began to organize full time. And uh, well it was a long time ago, so, in the beginning we wouldn't accept help from anyone. Several groups wanted to give us money and uh, we said no, want to do it ourselves we don't want anybody to tell us how to do it, we have some ideas that we want to try. And if we get money from other groups then we may not be able to.

07:33 And, uh, the idea we had was that, all the mistakes that I had seen committed in the other groups where I originally started, I was trying to, to uh, correct. One was that, uh, as the group became more, the CSO became better known and more influential, the leadership became more middle class, and the conventions were held, were places where the poor people couldn't attend. And so effectively they couldn't be represented because uh, they themselves couldn't participate, it was too expensive. And, uh, I set out to reverse that and uh, and so much so that toady, you know, in our conventions and our meetings, we don't allow neckties. They don't have to dress, you know, you know, for this meeting, this is your meeting, this is your home.

08:40 Also, the concern you know was, well that, uh, we can't do that, for instance they'd say, well we can't organize unions because its a very controversial subject and we may be destroyed in the process. The group may be destroyed. And I used to argue that, well that's what groups are made for. Our group is organized to help people, if we get destroyed in the process, that is fine, you know, that is its purpose. How else can we proceed unless we try? And uh, so, then the other thing was that, we used to operate with uh, most of, a lot of money coming from people outside the community and I set out to reverse that. So I wouldn't take money from anyone, but I, we, after 8, 9 months of organizing we were able to set up our first foundation, our first meeting, our first convention. And uh, the workers voted to set monthly dues, without any contracts or without any union, but with a dream of organizing one, at \$3.50 a month, and we went out and began to get membership and to you know, assess the \$3.50 a month. Uh, the first convention we had 200 people at the convention, and uh, we signed up about, 30 days after the convention we had about 350 people signed up, that were going to be members. Six months later we had 12 people paying dues.

10:38 Yeah, it was very very difficult. They were with us, and they liked, but you know, well, they were very poor. And uh, they figured they could use their dues for something else. And uh, I was, for me it was very difficult to insist on the dues because I had been right, well, working in the other organizations where people didn't have to pay dues if they didn't want to. But I was determined that if the workers themselves didn't pay for their organization they couldn't have one, that it just couldn't possibly work. So I remember in the first couple years how difficult it was for me to, to, to uh, carry out that order, the collecting the dues. Sometimes I'd go to homes, and like, in the winter, the people just extremely poor, you know,

and, I don't know one evening I went to a place about, oh, six miles south of Delano, in a little town, and I went to this man's home, he was delinquent two months, and I went, and I caught him as he was going out of the house, a little shack, and I talked to him about the dues, and the responsibility, how important it was. He looked at me, very dejected and he said, "I have five dollars with me, cause I was going to the store to get, to buy groceries." He said, "if you want to, I can give you \$3.50 now and instead of buying \$5.00 worth of groceries, I'll buy \$1.50." And uh, it was extremely difficult to uh, stand rigid on the dues. And I had to take, thought, it has to be done, I guess, so I told him, while this broke my heart to do it, that it had to be done, that I was convinced that if we didn't do that, you know, the dues, then we would never have a union. He says, "O.K." So, he gave me \$3.50 and I gave him \$1.50 back, and uh, he went to the store to buy \$1.50 worth of groceries. And I got home, I remember that that evening and I was very very well, I was very pained because of what I had done, and was trying to justify it because uh, in the hope that, you know, well if they pay dues they'll have a union. And this, was, oh, about 1963, uh, that man consequently became one of the best members we had, and I don't know if that was the decision, but it peaked, and in 1966, in 1966, when we got our first contract, he was one of the first to benefit from the wage, about 100% increase in wages and benefits.

14:01 So those were the early days when things were, you know, but even in the organizing CSO, a lot of the work that I did was with the farm worker. I uh, elected to organize in the rural areas, and left the cities to some of the other organizers. When I became director of the organization, I was working with the rural areas, and so I had uh, in the 12 years that I worked with CSO I built uh, an awful lot of friendship among workers, up and down the valley. But I knew a lot of them from the days that I'd worked with them uh, in the field. And so, uh, those

were the, you know, the early beginnings. We didn't have uh, well we didn't have any, hardly any resources whatsoever, every time we got a dollar, we had to, to uh, decide whether we were going to buy gas or buy the mimeograph paper with it.

15:29 Well, uh, one is, I can't really explain it except that, to me, there isn't anything, there isn't anything uh, that I'd like to do better than this. Secondly, uh, I think that, well, I've always had hope that things will be, that social justice and good community would be respected, and their rights begin with this organization. Uh, and I now how, fully how difficult it is, but I also know that if they're organized, they can do something. But I learned, through an experience in the early part of my organizing period, I had uh, developed a, well in those days a very effective way of organizing was by uh, developing really close personal relationships with the people I was organizing. And being of service to them at any time, day or night, any day of the week.

16:40 And after about well, from that time that I was hired for \$30., well, after about maybe 9 months of that kind of organizing, I was getting tired. And uh, I was trying to get a day off, to take my son to the park, and I was just, on Sunday, I was just uh, get away from it. And I had been uh, promising myself, the members of my family, my wife and, next time we will do it, next time would come, and I couldn't, next time I'll do it. Finally uh, I said, this coming Sunday, I don't care what happens, we're going to go. Work was in those days unorganized, we were very badly paid, and we had no, no help whatsoever, I had a lot of help in the union, nobody was anywhere, and I had to do all of my correspondence myself, and do the service work, and fight the fight for the individual members, and help run the meetings, and everything. So, that Sunday came and we got up really early and went to Mass and we came back and uh, to pick up the picnic basket, and

coming back it was getting out of the car, a car full of people wanted to see me, they had personal problem, somebody had been jailed in the family the night before, he's been beaten by the cops and they were very upset, a young man. And, so I sat there looking at the people wanting help, and my own personal recreation, and uh, my wife and the kids in the car, you know, waiting. So I decided against going to the picnic and went to help the family.

18:25 So it took me almost all day and part of the night, I didn't get home until about 9 o'clock that evening, and told my wife that I was unhappy. That I'm torn between wanting some time to myself, and at the same time to give people a lot of time. It doesn't work, I have to make a decision. So, she's been very great about this, she's been very understanding, she would support me.

So I told her that I was going to work another 4 to 6 months and that I was going to have to make a decision, that if I decided I was going to stay it would mean that I was going to literally to give up my own personal life, compared, and I was going to devote every minute that I had to the cause. And if I, and if I couldn't do that then I was going to quit and do something else. So I continued working and uh, thinking very seriously and very hard about what, you know, well, but the decision had to be made and I was trying to make a commitment, a total commitment. So, at the end of the six month period I talked with her and I told her that I thought that uh, that uh I couldn't spend, that I thought I couldn't spend my life doing anything more worthwhile than working with poor people, and that uh, even if I went elsewhere to do something else, that even if I had time I wouldn't be happy. And that I thought that the best thing for me to do was to continue doing this, but also to tell her that if I continue organizing I would have to change from being of service to, literally being of service to people, just working. And uh, she agreed. And I

find a little time for my family but uh, it's become like, it's part of my work, they're included in what I do.

20:30 And so, that was a long time ago, about 18 years ago, so. And uh, once I made a decision I didn't have any more problems, because I wasn't torn between. And I think it was a good decision, if I had to make it, I'd make it all over again. But I set my mind at ease and I made the decision that people would come first, and that I would work it, there wouldn't be any days off, unless there was no other thing to do. And even today, you know, when uh, I have much, much more help. I can delegate a lot more work and responsibility to other people. But even today, I'm at home and someone comes with a problem, I don't care whether it's two o'clock in the morning, 5 o'clock in the morning, Sunday or a holiday, I'll get up and do the work. But it's the, but this time I do it gladly because I've already crossed that problem and it's much easier. Many organizers never make that resolution and so they find themselves trying to organize and yet beating themselves up because they can't have the time for them. They can't have it both ways, they can't, so.

22:00 Well, uh, I really don't think about it, uh, I think that my life for the last twenty years has been like one, just one long day, you know, it's just, everything put in together. It doesn't stop. And those were happy days, happy years, all in all you know... in organizing there's a lot of disappointments, but they're short lived and they're just minor things. But on the overall, I'm very happy it turned out this way, and uh, much more so because I've been able to be a part of it.

[Q: derive support from belief in God?]

23:11 Yeah, that's the foundation. Because you see, you can't, you can't very well, place all your hopes in, in uh, an economic. You can't really place all your hopes in uh, other things. And I think that uh, fundamentally, there's got to be some belief somewhere. And so, in our faith, we are taught from childhood, some of the things we're doing are the things that we're expected to do anyway. And uh, uh, I think that belief is the confidence, is the source of strength. But uh, it's not uh, uh, uh, its not a passive belief, you know. Its not a belief, is the word Catholic faith being used here? No, it's more than that, it's uh, you know, here are the people and here's the suffering, and we're uh, we're literally commanded to do something about it you know and there's no way we can't. And this is kind of uh, so it worked out, you know I think. And even when, even when things don't turn out, even when things don't turn out the way you want them to turn out, there's always... and even in the face of the biggest disappointment there's always that faith, that tomorrow's gonna be different. And sure enough, tomorrow's always different. However difficult the problem may be, however difficult when a decision has to be made, and uh, ...

25:23 ..[SOUND SUDDENLY GETS CLEANER, LESS BACKGROUND NOISE] the next day, things will look better, always. So you see uh, the thing that makes the decision making in one area very difficult, and that's uh, political decisions can be made, you know, and technical, decisions involving strategy can be made, but when it comes to moral decisions, then uh, they're hard. Most moral decisions means that you have to stand up against you friends in many cases. And uh, those are difficult to make. One always knows the answer but one's not always willing to offend people you know, or at least you know, have people who are close to you uh, be offended because of the decision. And I always said that moral decisions are the most difficult to make. You know what the answer is, I think that

every one does, I suppose. But making decisions to affect other people's lives, you know that, that critically. They have to be made and uh, they are made. And uh, usually they're not understood by the affected party, in 90% of the cases they're not understood, and in 100% of the cases they're never accepted. But in time they'll change, but immediately, no. They're not...

27:22 Also, the whole question of organizing and you know, demanding that uh, people strive for, for excellence, and strive for, for uh, success in organizing, which is [BACKGROUND SOUND IS LOUD AGAIN] once the decision is made, the moral decision to be non-violent, when that's made, then, what I call H(?) organizing, is the essence you know, of keeping the non-violence alive. Of preventing people from going to pieces because they get discouraged and frustrated and so forth, not because they're non-violent, because they stop the organizers. And uh, so we work very hard at that.

28:20 I look at organizing as something, something that's not really that vague, but something that's really concrete. And that's uh, of all the experiences that I've ever had, the places where I've failed to organize have been only because I was not willing to give the time necessary to do the job that had to be done. But in those cases where I've been willing to give all the time necessary for the work to do, it's been successful. And so we say that organizing, and it applies much more so in a struggle of, our struggle, the sort of struggle we're in, that organizing uh, can be accomplished, and organizing is uh, something that can come about, and that many times people who are organizing will find excuses for their failures. And the biggest scapegoat a lot of times is non-violence.

29:32 Non-violence is the first thing of all the things that, all the things that can be checked off, non-violence is the first one checked off. Instinctively people say, non-violence doesn't work, we tried it. Well, non-violence, the reasoning action, ...locked up in my closet, and then tell people just be patient, non-violence, things are going to change. They'll never change, people will become impatient. But if I say non-violence is the way to go, and uh, be patient, but work very hard at being accomplished organizers, then things will change, and surely they will change. And uh, if we say, in every contest, whether it be, even in contests where we say uh, uh, even in sports, in any contest, in order to win, you have to be on the defensive. Rather than only offensive. If you're on the defensive, the other person's going to lose. And this is the, well, non-violence then, in struggles like ours, gives us unlimited, unrestricted uh, uh, opportunities to be on the offensive. Constantly.

31:05 And uh, we don't have to then be confronted with, what so many organizers go through, that they are detracted from their main, from their course. For instance, people who are non-, people who are concerned, who are organizing and leading movements, who are concerned human beings, basically are non-violent. And if they choose violence, they choose violence only because they feel that violence is, uh, a shortcut, or is the only alternative left to them. So, I contend that anyone who is willing to sacrifice himself and his family and all of the things that he has, for other people, by nature is not violent. But uses violence only when he gets cornered and feels that he's trapped and there's no other alternative. So our job then is to prevent ourselves from being trapped, and finding that we have no alternative, and being cornered, being the solution. And frustrated. And then going the violent way.

32:00 What it means then, it means we have to be very, very, we have to be very, uh, truthful with ourselves, if we are not succeeding organizing, we have to admit it. Because generally people say, well, the people don't want it. Or the people won't respond. Or the people don't care. And those aren't excuses, to me, they're not valid. People have problems, if we show 'em the way, they'll do it. I may not be able to show 'em the way, people won't respond, but they want organization, but everyone knows instinctively that that's how it gets ahead. So, uh, if we can then prepare organizers that they'll be successful, then the chances of being cornered and frustrated are much less, and the potential for violence is therefore less.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO:

[Opens with casual conversation in a car, very loud background. Follows with inaudible recording of Cesar speaking in echoing auditorium. Then the singing of "Blowing in the Wind" followed by a prayer and response. Then very garbled conversation in car, with noisy background.]