

EL MALCRIADO
"THE VOICE OF THE FARMWORKER"
Origins, 1964-1965

When Cesar Chavez and Gilbert Padilla set out to build a farm workers' movement in 1962, a newspaper, a "voice of the farm worker," was high on their list of projects "to do".

In the first years, the focus was on organizing a membership base and creating benefits to serve those members. By 1964, what would become the United Farm Workers had a life insurance program, with a death benefit covering the member and his/her spouse; and a credit union through which members could pool savings and make small loans to each other. By this time, there was a core of about 50 dues-paying families. And Dolores Huerta had come on full time to serve the membership as an advocate.

In late 1964, Chavez was ready to launch his newspaper, to be named "El Malcriado." He turned to Bill Esher to help produce and distribute it. Esher was a New Yorker, his dad a college teacher, and he had attended Syracuse University for a couple of years before heading west in youthful rebellion. He ended up in the San Francisco Bay Area, and gravitated towards the Catholic Worker community, which had a farm labor project based in Oakland. (Esher was not Catholic, but his parents were supporters of Dorothy Day, and later moved to Tivoli, New York and became personal friends of the C.W. leader). The C.W. sponsored a bus and transportation to help poor folks in Oakland find and get to farm labor jobs. Esher ended up driving the bus.

During this time (1963-64), Esher also came in touch with Hank Anderson, a leader of "Citizens for Farm Labor", one of the few groups in California (along with the American Friends Service Committee) expressing any concern over the horrendous conditions of farm labor in the state and nation. It was through Anderson and CFL that Esher met Wendy Goepel, who in turn introduced Esher to Chavez.

Wendy Goepel had a job with Gov. "Pat" Brown's Democratic administration. She was almost alone in that "liberal" but grower-friendly administration in taking any interest in farm labor. Goepel had reached out to Chavez, as he began organizing in the early 1960's, and had promoted various projects utilizing union members in surveys and investigations. In 1964 she recruited Esher to take a job picking melons in Kern County, and documenting and reporting wage and labor violations. It was at this time period that Goepel introduced Esher to Chavez. Chavez was immediately impressed with the young man and asked him move to Delano and begin work on a

newspaper. Esher demurred, asking for 3 months. By the time Esher accepted the offer and did move to Delano in early 1965, Chavez had already produced the first issue of "El Malcriado," in late 1964. Esher edited "El Malcriado" #2, and through 1967.

The name "El Malcriado" was reportedly taken from a radical newspaper produced in Mexico in the Revolutionary Period (c. 1910?) (or possibly, a Southern California publication of the 1920's-1930's?). The implication is a rowdy youth, "badly raised," who does not give due respect to his "betters," who does not remain silent and docile, who challenges authority (an example in today's pop culture might be Bard Simpson).

In addition to choosing the name, Chavez had decided to seek out a printer with a union contract for its workers, traveling to Fresno (rather than the closer, non-union presses in Bakersfield) for the "union bug." Chavez had decided the paper would be a benefit for the members, offered by subscription, and sold in barrio stores throughout the Central Valley of California.

Long before the first issue, Chavez had also sounded out Andy Zermeno, a talented young Chicano artist, with family connections in the farm labor communities in Delano and San Jose. Zermeno created a series of characters, which would appear regularly in the newspaper (and grace the first two covers) over the next years. "Don Sotaco" was the short and (initially) humble and abused farm worker; "Don Coyote" the labor contractor and field boss, skinny and devious in his service to the boss; and "Patroncito," the Big Boss, plump-to-fat, often with a big hat, big cigar, boots and sun glasses. Chavez and Esher would travel to Los Angeles to discuss cartoon ideas and Zermeno would wield his pen, brilliantly transforming the ideas into visuals.

In the winter of 1964-65, there were almost no funds in the organization's coffers, and Goepal gave Esher a \$50 monthly stipend out of her own pocket for personal expenses. Esher (and Chavez) sometimes worked in the fields together that winter, employed by a Chavez cousin who was a labor contractor and lived next to the new union office at 102 Albany Street at the edge of Delano. The newspaper was set up with finances separate from the union, and with The Farm Worker Press as a nominally separate entity and publisher. From the first, Chavez was worried that the newspaper would generate lawsuits, which the growers would use to go after the union. Until 1968, the paper and Farm Worker Press were self-financing.

What would become the United Farm Workers Union was initially called the Farm Workers' Association, and then the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA on the early buttons), before evolving into the union it is today. When I joined the union in 1965, Esher explained to me that "Union" had bad connotations with many farm

workers, an organization controlled by outsiders and city people, that would come in and call strikes, and then leave after the strike was lost. In 1965, the AFL-CIO was funding the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), based in Stockton, California but controlled by AFL bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. The California leadership was appointed from Washington and had origins in other unions, not farm labor. The Farm Workers' Association was to be different, a democratic membership organization providing benefits, building for the future, but not (until the AWOC itself went on strike on Sept. 8, 1965) promoting strikes.

Starting with some of the earliest issues, "El Malcriado," drew a link between the farm workers' struggle for justice in the U.S.A. and the peasant struggle for justice in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). Chavez and Esher were enthusiastic admirers of revolutionary art that came out of the Mexican Revolution, and woodcuts and pen-and-ink art began gracing covers of the paper. Emiliano Zapata was featured on an early cover in 1965. Slogans and sentiments from the Revolution began appearing in the pages, "The land, like the water and the air, should belong to the people""Better to die on your feet than live on your knees..." There were many folk in Delano in 1965 who had had personal experience with the revolution and its aftermath, and with the serfdom and pre-revolutionary hacienda system which they could compare to the system of California agribusiness.

The spring of 1965 also witnessed an upsurge in the Civil Rights Movement taking place in the South. "El Malcriado" related the farm workers' struggle for justice with that movement as well. A Black Madonna and Child appeared on an early cover, and another cover showed cops beating a picketer. Esher's editorial, "What is a Movement?" in Issue #19, captures the sense of excitement and anticipation as more and more Americans began to face up to the injustices suffered by so much of the American under-class.

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