

El Malcriado 1964-1970 Analysis

El Malcriado and the Farm Worker Press were set up by Cesar Chavez in the winter of 1964-65 to be independent of the (National) Farm Workers' Association. After he recruited Bill Esher (or "organized him" as we used to say), the two of them developed the tone and spirit of the paper. Every issue up until the summer of 1965 was a joint effort. Chavez was familiar with the mechanics of putting out the paper after the articles were written, the typing and paste up, the midnight search for a photo or art work to go on the cover, the early morning drive to the printers in Fresno, the long day waiting for the paper to be printed (a chance to take some of the Chavez or Huerta kids to the Fresno zoo?), and after the drive back to Delano, three days of driving the Central Valley to distribute it to the barrio stores. The mail order was another set of chores, new subscriptions, changes of address, bent address plates that would jam the 1902 addressing machine, the sorting and bundling by zip codes, the trip to the post office where the postmaster (and mayor) would eye us nervously.

In the summer of 1965, Chavez was ill for several weeks. Esher was doing almost all the work. It was at this point that Esher sought to recruit me as an assistant. Once the strike started, Esher had little one-on-one time with Chavez, but Chavez seemed to have tremendous confidence in Esher. For his part, Esher sensed what Chavez wanted, a paper that served him and the movement without costing the union anything in time or especially money. When the NFWA established the \$5/a week "pay", the staff of *El Malcriado* was paid out of Farm Worker Press funds. We ate at the union camp and later Filipino Hall. We did not have housing expenses and found spaces in homes of members.

In addition to the addressing machine, the Farm Worker Press had an IBM executive electric typewriter, and that was about it for equipment. Esher shared Chavez' disdain of the expenses of the telephone (a disdain I inherited); and the expenses of photography. We didn't hesitate to cut pictures out of newspapers and magazines. By-lines were rarely used.

Once the strike started, the glaring shortcoming of the staff was the lack of Spanish writers and translators. We became adept at snagging union staff and visitors who could help us -- "just this one article--"... Some member wrote in complaining about our poor Spanish, and another defended us, "it's the message, not the spelling" was the defense.

A possible benefit of being English-speaking was that, from the earliest days of the strike, we were attuned to the voice and interests of the Filipino community, and of

the multi-ethnic aspects of the struggle. Sergio Tumbaga and Rudy Reyes (and later, Sebastian Sahagun) served on our staff. There was such an explosion of pride in "La Raza" as the movement progressed, that there was always a danger of going over the line. The *Malcriado* celebrated movements like Corky Gonzalez in Denver, but we were dubious of Reyes Tijerina in New Mexico. The independence of the paper gave Chavez and the union deniability, if our reporting angle gave offence to somebody. As time went on, most of Chavez' visits to our office were because someone whose support the Union wanted had taken offence to something the paper printed.

A tremendous dialogue was taking place within the union at this time, and *El Malcriado* listened in with all ears. It was a point in history when land reform was still on the agenda in many countries. We had members with a living memory of the Mexican Revolution, of hanging the landlord and dividing up the hacienda. The *Malcriado* quoted Emeliano Zapata on the land, like the air and water, belonging to "el Pueblo," the people, the community. The paper praised the 160-acre limitation for farms receiving subsidized irrigation water. We also reported approvingly of union contracts on the factory farms of pineapples and sugar in Hawaii.

Inner- and Intra-union politics came to a head with the proposed merger with the AFL-CIO in 1966. The *Malcriado* staff were all personally in favor of the merger -- the best way to unite the Filipino and Mexicano membership. But we were well aware of the arguments by the UAW folks and other unions and radicals warning against the merger. None of us considered George Meany a friend of the farm workers. We hoped that Chavez and Huerta would get the best deal possible for the interests of farm workers. And we came to have real respect for and confidence in Bill Kircher, the AFL representative in charge of liaison with our union. Some first-rate organizers and dear brothers and sisters unhappy with the merger, left at this time, "the first purge" for conspiracy theorists.

These staff departures in 1966 also set off the first guilt tripping about "quitters", which later became common. *El Malcriado* included plenty of "sacrificios para la causa" stories and exhortations, but informally, we made fun of the "holier-than-thou" folks. We had a poster on the wall, Emma Goldman, "If I can't dance at your revolution, I don't want to be in your party..." When the culture wars came to Delano, the staffs of *El Malcriado* and the Teatro Campesino were accused of staying up late, allowing beer, music and laughter, having way too much fun. Some folks who came into the union, especially from the Migrant Ministry and Catholic Church, were people for whom "sacrifices" was a life style choice. These were joined by some on the left, "Heavy Revs", we teased them. We teased the folks with clip boards, Marshall Ganz and Nick Jones and Jim Drake; the enforcers of discipline, Drake and LeRoy Chatfield.

Since I had been "organized" by Gil Padilla, my focus was always on beneficios. I went to Delano not to strike or even to support the strike, but rather to work in the grapes and help build a union that would bring me more benefits. I, and most of the volunteers, including the Church people, were doing exactly what we/they wanted to be doing, and how lucky to be there in that time and place, to be able to serve la Causa.

Once we began signing contracts, the balance between an emphasis on "beneficios" and an emphasis on "sacrificios" became more important. Members wanted benefits -- they were paying dues for specific promises of benefits by the union. The union staff, not unnaturally, wanted to mobilize the membership for service to the union -- members were getting these benefits thanks to "our" sacrifices, went the argument. The demands on the members were on their time: meetings, often after a 9 or 10 hour day in the sun... and then sometimes fines for failure to attend... on political campaigns (sometimes compulsory)... picket lines... Part of the appeal of the Teamsters in 1973 and 1975 was that they made no demands on the workers' time. When the Union staff put less emphasis on delivering the promised benefits of the contract (i.e., the Medical Plan checks), the members reacted negatively. The purpose of founding the Union in 1962, and in joining the grape strike in 1965, was to win benefits and justice for farm workers. "Sacrificing non-violently for others" was not an end in itself.

The persona of a "malcriado," as established by Cesar Chavez and Bill Esher in 1964-65, influenced the newspaper staff, and appeared in our relationships with the rest of the union staff and leadership, as well as in our pages. Eventually, Chavez and the leadership decided that the paper was no longer serving their greater interests. After various format and staff changes in 1970-71, the paper was eliminated as one of the benefits offered to the members, and then closed down completely in the 1970's.

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