

CHAVEZ FACES INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STRUGGLES

By WAYNE KING, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

Published: December 6, 1981

Battered by the aftermath of a quashed rebellion and a feud with some former highly placed leaders, Cesar Chavez and his United Farm Workers appear vulnerable as they head for a renewed organizing battle next year with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

The rancor within the farm union first broke into the open in September in a dispute in which 50 dissident delegates from the Salinas Valley walked off the floor of a union convention in Fresno amid shouts of "traitor" from supporters of Mr. Chavez.

Now there are allegations by former union officials, vehemently denied by Mr. Chavez, that dissenters are being purged from positions of influence and that the union hierarchy has become preoccupied with what it regards as clandestine plots hatched by elements trying to destroy the union.

The infighting comes just as the Farm Workers must get ready for a possible return bout with the teamsters, who drove the fledgling Chavez organization to virtual extinction in 1973 by obtaining contracts with farmers who preferred almost anything to the charismatic Mr. Chavez and his militant followers.

Mr. Chavez established his union in the late 1960's by means of a nationwide boycott of California table grapes. The boycott proved so effective that by June 1970 the state's growers, unable to stand the financial strain, signed landmark contracts with the new union. It was hailed as the first truly effective union of agricultural workers, with a potential for hundreds of thousands of members nationwide.

After the teamsters mounted their successful raid, reducing the Farm Workers to a comparative handful of members, Mr. Chavez and his forces fought back. They mounted a legal attack that tied up the teamsters in scores of lawsuits while Mr. Chavez orchestrated a nationwide sympathy campaign. As a result, in 1977 the teamsters declared a five-year moratorium on organizing agricultural workers.

Two years earlier, the union won passage of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, considered the most useful legal umbrella for organizing agricultural workers in the history of American labor. The law guarantees the workers the right to organize and bargain collectively and protects them from reprisals.

Today the union claims 108,000 members, most of them migrant laborers in California, but it concedes that the figure represents every worker who has spent "one hour to one year" working for a grower under a union contract. May Be Closer to 30,000

A perhaps more realistic figure, obtained by adding up the peak work force for every grower under contract throughout the past year, is closer to 30,000. This number has remained relatively constant for several years as the union has shifted from all-out organizing to more concerted bargaining for the workers it represents.

Now, with the "hands-off" agreement with the teamsters expiring on March 10, many in the labor community expect teamster locals to go after the Farm Workers once again. The teamsters decline to comment on their organizing plans.

Meanwhile the farm union is embroiled in two related battles within its ranks, an unexpected development in a union that until recent years was remarkable for its single-minded devotion to Mr. Chavez.

Some of those who have left say that an atmosphere of suspicion began developing in the union four years ago and that a number of people resigned or were forced to depart because of questions about their loyalty to Mr. Chavez and his cause.

One of the current fights involves workers in the Salinas Valley, which was considered a union showcase because of gains the workers won there after a series of strikes in 1979. Trouble became apparent last fall when dissident delegates from that area put up a slate of three executive board candidates to oppose three of the nine members on a slate backed by Mr. Chavez.
Accusations of Conspiracy

The dissidents walked out of the Fresno convention, maintaining that they were being wrongly accused by Chavez supporters of taking part in a conspiracy to take over or destroy the union. The Chavez faction easily maintained control of the union in the vote that followed.

Jose Renteria, 27 years old, who had been the union's field director in Salinas, was one of the opposition candidates and one of the leaders of the resulting walkout. He said in a recent telephone interview that he had sought the post on the union's executive board at the urging of workers dissatisfied with long delays in payments from the pension and medical fund, a lack of adequate union personnel to assist in arbitration and negotiation and what they perceived as a trend toward accepting low wage settlements.

The dissenters, Mr. Renteria said, were subjected to a whispering campaign initiated by incumbent board members. "In some cases they said we were working for the growers," he said, "in other cases they said we were Communists, in other cases they were saying we were working for the teamsters." Rift Is Traced to Retaliation

In telephone interviews Mr. Chavez said the rift developed when two board members were sent to Salinas to correct management problems within the union and Mr. Renteria mounted opposition in retaliation.

He also contended that Mr. Renteria had worked with the growers. "In fact, at some points," he said, "some of the fellows for Renteria, and the growers, the employers, prevented us from going

into the fields to talk to the workers. In this case Renteria and these guys teamed up with the growers, and that's a Federal offense."

Mr. Renteria also made public an allegation, on a subject that has heightened tensions within the union, that a member of the executive board had on several occasions uttered anti-Semitic statements.

Asked about it, Mr. Chavez acknowledged that the allegation had come to the attention of the union, but he said he had looked into it and found it totally without foundation. Citing the union's long record of friendship with Jewish organizations, Mr. Chavez said he himself considered the allegation "really disgusting." They 'Wanted to Take Over'

Mr. Renteria maintained that as far back as 1979 a longtime union member, Frank Ortiz, one of the targets of the dissident slate, was "saying that the Jews and the Anglos wanted to take over the union."

Mr. Chavez said he had obtained a denial in writing from Mr. Ortiz. Mr. Ortiz did not respond to a request through the union to comment on the matter.

Scott Washburn, who was an organizer with the union for 10 years, resigned last fall because of what he considered a de-emphasis on organizing and a stagnation of union growth. He said he heard Mr. Ortiz tell a group of three delegates in Oceanside, Calif., a week before the convention that "the Jews were trying to take over the union - the two Jews, Jerry and Marshall, are trying to take over the union" and that union difficulties were being "orchestrated" by the two men.

Jerry Cohen was chief counsel and director of the Farm Workers' legal department for 14 years until his resignation this year. Marshall Ganz was the union's chief organizer for a similar period until he also resigned this year. Both declined to discuss publicly their reasons for leaving.
Ecumenical Tradition Cited

In a telephone interview, Carlos Alcala, an attorney for the union, dismissed the allegations of anti-Semitism, noting the ecumenical tradition of the union and the fact that Jews had held high positions in the union for many years.

Before switching in 1978 to an unpaid volunteer system, Mr. Alcala said, "The legal department of the U.F.W. had 18 people, all of them were Jewish. Nobody ever said the Jews were trying to take over the union, despite the fact that of all the Mexican-American attorneys in this state there was not a single one that was working for the U.F.W. legal department."

But Mr. Cohen said not everyone on the staff was Jewish. Terming Mr. Alcala's assessment "interesting but inaccurate," he said, "There were all kinds of people in the legal department."

Adding fuel to the controversy are allegations arising from the parallel interests of the union and the California Rural Legal Assistance, a federally financed program with many migrant farm workers as clients.

Two former executive board members of the union who resigned within the last year later went to work as consultants for the legal assistance program but encountered difficulty about their contracts. They recently contended that the contracts were not being renewed because the union had pressured the legal aid program.

The two are Jessica Govea, who had been in the union 15 years and was director of its health services program until her resignation last June, and Gilbert Padilla, a longtime friend of Mr. Chavez's, a founder of the union and its secretary-treasurer until his resignation a year ago. A Discussion With Chavez

Alberto Soldamando, director of the legal aid project, acknowledged that his group had met with Mr. Chavez and the union's board of directors to discuss former union staff members who took jobs with the legal organization.

Mr. Soldamando said the meeting had resulted from the picketing of a legal aid office in the town of Gilroy by Farm Workers who demanded the removal of another former union member who had been hired by the legal aid service. But he maintained that the names of Mr. Padilla and Miss Govea had not come up.

He acknowledged that Miss Govea's contract had been terminated, an action he ascribed to budget considerations and the completion of the task she had been hired for. He said no final decision had been made on whether to terminate Mr. Padilla's contract.

Mr. Alcalá of the union's legal staff insisted that the real reason for the division that led to the resignations of Miss Govea, Mr. Padilla, Mr. Cohen and Mr. Ganz from the union was a dispute over whether the union should continue as a movement primarily dependent on volunteers for its staff or one that should have a paid staff. Rewards on a 'Higher Moral Plane'

Previously, the union's staff was primarily unpaid, except for the legal department. In 1978 the executive board voted to depend on volunteers in all departments. The volunteers live in a communal setting at La Paz, Calif., and are paid \$15 to \$25 a week for essentials.

There are still exceptions. Mr. Alcalá himself is on paid retainer with the legal staff, which he said now included four or five unpaid volunteer lawyers and some paralegals.

Mr. Chavez, Mr. Alcalá said, "believes that the Farm Workers' movement operates out of dedication, that people should be paid on a higher moral plane, that the principles of Catholicism, of St. Francis of Assisi, are correct and that when you are dedicated to people your reward will come to you on a higher moral plane."

Some of those who have left the union, however, including Mr. Padilla, the former secretary-treasurer, said the conflict resulted from the atmosphere of suspicion that began developing about 1977. At that time, these former members said, there were a number of resignations or forced departures among people in positions of authority in the union.

The reasons for the resignations, Mr. Padilla said, were suspicions of "disloyalty" to Mr. Chavez and "working against the best interests of the union." A Separate 'Agenda' of Ideas

A spokesman for the union, the Rev. Wayne C. Hartmire, acknowledged that there had been a number of dismissals in the period referred to by Mr. Padilla, but he said they resulted from a cutback of unneeded staff and removal of some staff members who he said had "their own agenda" of ideas that conflicted with the union's principles, such as nonviolence.

Mr. Padilla also said this was about the same period in which Mr. Chavez became interested in a confrontation or sensitivity exercise that was referred to as "the game" or "the Synanon game."

The "Synanon game" is a form of group therapy in which participants subject one another to intense, prolonged verbal abuse. It takes its name from the Synanon organization in California, which claimed great success for the technique in the 1970's in rehabilitating drug users. Synanon later came under attack, with California officials charging that it had become an authoritative cult.

"I played it," Mr. Padilla said, "Horrible, man, you sit down and you cuss at each other. You say anything that comes in your mind. The only rule there is don't be violent, physical violence. You could call anybody anything you want." 'We Never Played'

Asked about the "game" and its effects, Mr. Chavez said, "We never played the Synanon game." Instead, he said, he had investigated "a number of outfits in California who were experimenting with sensitivity sessions," including Synanon and a San Francisco organization called the Delancy Street Foundation, "who play 'a game' - they don't call it the Synanon game."

Mr. Chavez said he had undertaken the sessions because "I felt people were not squaring with me, they were not telling me what I should know, they were not criticizing me, they were not telling me the truth, and it was hurting the union."

He said he had told participants, "You have the right to tell me all the criticisms you have about me, but I don't want you to stand behind my back, I want you to tell me to my face so we can work something out."

He said the sessions had "worked well for a while," but had been abandoned four or five years ago. Enemies Are Termed 'Real'

Mr. Hartmire, a Presbyterian minister who lives at the La Paz commune, said he had organized the sessions and had taken part in a number of them. He said that hundreds of people who took part had found them beneficial, but that they were abandoned in 1978, except for a few sporadic sessions in boycotts or other places when it was felt that tensions were developing.

Mr. Hartmire said the "game" played by the union was a modified version of the Synanon therapy, but he said it differed in that Synanon used the method as an integral part of therapy for drug addicts while the union relied on it essentially as a means of unfettered communication.

As to allegations that union leaders had envisioned imaginary conspiracies, Mr. Alcala said the union's opponents were "real and numerous."

He cited a reported plot against Mr. Chavez's life in 1972, 14 burglaries and two arsons at union offices and purported efforts by growers to weaken the union by encouraging decertification petitions and attempting through sympathetic legislators to water down the landmark Agricultural Labor Relations Act governing farm worker organizing.