Cesar Chavez Talks in New York, 1968

We are not in the age of miracles, and yet it is surprising that we can attract, and keep, and increase the type of support that is needed to keep our economic struggle going for 33 months. It is a struggle in which the poorest of the poor and weakest of the weak are pitted against the strongest of the strong. We are fighting not against the family farm, not against agriculture, but against agribusiness.

When we think of powerful interests, we think of General Motors and other great corporations. But we must turn our minds to the power of the land. It is hard to think that agribusiness could have such tremendous power as it has in California--it is worth five billion dollars in our state alone. We must see it as it is, a similar situation to Latin America. The interests can control not only the land but everything that moves, everyone that walks in the land. They control even the actions of the Congress of the United States, even some church groups. Right up to today, some groups in the churches think we are a bunch of communists. I can take the credit for one of the first ecumenical actions of the churches in the Delano area. Some ministers and priests got together to make a statement denouncing us as outside agitators.

You must have some of the background of agriculture in California to understand what we have been doing. The three basic elements people, poor people, to provide the cheap labor.

We know how the land was acquired. The railroads, the Union Pacific and the Southern Pacific, got large tracts of land, and so did the Bank of America. Who would think that the Bank of America is a grower, but it is.

When the land was reclaimed, water had to be brought in from great distances, even six-hundred to seven-hundred miles. Your taxes are paying for this water supply today. Ours are not, right now, because we are on strike. Back in the early part of this century, legislators began to see that the family farm should be helped. So water was to be supplied to 160-acre farms. This was never enforced. The water went to the larger tracts.

One thing was necessary to the success of the exploitation of California land: workers. The whole cry to get poor people to do the work of the land is a story in itself. When the Southern Pacific and Union Pacific railroads were completed, the Chinese were left without work to do. They went to the cities. The growers who needed workers dealt with contractors who supplied the Chinese. The contractors, who were Chinese themselves, began to sell their brothers for profit. When the Chinese wanted to own their own land, we had the Chinese Exclusion Act. The Chinese land workers could not own land nor could they marry Caucasian women, so they left agriculture for the cities.

The growers went to Congress for special legislation. Tailor-make immigration laws made it possible for them to recruit

labor from Japan. When the Japanese used the slow-down (they had no unions and could not strike) to get better conditions, the growers began to get rid of them. The Japanese could not own land, either, but began to rent it. In time they began to exploit the laborers.

The growers even went to India for labor, and in the early twenties they were recruiting in the Philippines. When they saw that many Mexicans were leaving their country because of the Revolution, they saw an opportunity. One grower explained that Mexicans were good for California land work because they were short and close to the ground. The growers went further than they ever went before. During World War II, our own government became the recruiter for laborers, "braceros." Even today, as I stand here talking to you, we cannot choke off production on the great farms for one simple reason. The regulations on immigration are not being enforced. Our own government is the biggest strikebreaker against the union. The biggest weapon in the hands of the growers is the "green card" commuter.

You can live in Mexico and come in to work for a season and then go back home. This is not like the regulations covering immigrants from Europe. Hundreds of thousands of people are recruited and put into employers' camps. We cannot reach them there. They are like concentration camps. If the laws were enforced, we would not have to boycott. Employers are not

supposed to recruit workers while labor disputes are in progress.

We have to play the game without any rules or procedures. In New York, the rights of unions are enforced, but in our case, 95% of the workers were signed up with the union but the producer of table grapes, Giumarra, refused to sit down with us for representation procedures. We were willing to abide by the results of the election. The employers would not talk to us. The only approach left to us is the strike and the boycott.

Now that the growers are hurting, they want an election. Their strike-breakers are inside. Who can win an election this way? This is the predicament we are in. We say to Giumarra, you are not going to get two bites at the same apple. You will have to sign an agreement under pressure. With Edison, we called off the strike and the boycott and we had a contract. Then the land was sold to another grower and we are out of a contract. The day the contract is concluded with Giumarra, that day we take off the pressure.

Even if you have an election--without rules or procedures or protection--what do you have but the law of the jungle? The Board says we have no protection, but when we institute a boycott, the growers go the Board and get protection.

People raise the question: Is this a strike or is it a civil-rights fight?

In California, in Texas, or in the South, any time you

strike, it becomes a civil-rights movement. It becomes a civil-rights fight.

The local courts say we have no right to use an amplifier to reach strikebreakers who are a quarter of a mile away. In every case, the growers get an injunction against us immediately. Then we go up to the Appellate Court and up to the Supreme Court. Justice is very expensive sometimes.

We go further. We take advantage of modern technology. I even went up in a plane with two priests to broadcast to the strikebreakers from seven hundred feet up. As soon as we came down, the growers were there to protest.

We have had priests with us before, during and after the strike. The priests of the California Migrant Ministry, Chris Hartmeier and Jim Drake, have been with us from the beginning. They took losses in their church because of the Migrant Ministry and the suffering they accepted was for the migrants and for justice. It was from them that we learned the importance of the support of the church in our struggle. The church is the one group that gives help and never qualifies it or asks for favors.

The priests and ministers do everything from sweeping floors to giving out leaflets. They developed a true worker-priest movement. In the field and in the center, a minister and a worker joined together. The importance of Christian teachings to the worker and to his struggle for dignity becomes clear. Now we

have a Franciscan priest working full time with us.

The three most important issues at this time are these.

First, union recognition by the employers. We have certain rights as human beings. Every law is for this recognition--except when it comes to farm workers. Recognizing the union is recognizing us as human beings. Second, an increase in wages is important. Third, in my opinion and in the opinion of the workers, is safety. The whole question of pesticides and insecticides must be met. The men who work to apply these poisons should have protection. Two or three weeks after working with pesticides a man begins to have trouble with his sight. In some cases, he begins to lose his finger-nails. It does not happen immediately. Someday our government will have to undertake real research to determine the effects of these poisons, not only on the workers who are in direct contact with them, but on the consumers. Millions of dollars are spent in the research on the effectiveness of the poisons in destroying pests and insects on plants. This is from the business angle. Millions must also be spent on the effects of the same poisons on human beings.

There is a fine dust that nature puts on grapes. It is called bloom. The contamination from the insecticides remains in this fine dust.

I don't eat grapes because I know about these pesticides. You can stop eating grapes for your safety as well as for the

boycott. Even our strongest supporters are afraid of the boycott of table grapes. The key to the success of this boycott is right here in New York. Action is necessary. If you don't do anything, you are permitting the evil. I would suggest that labor take a page in the largest newspaper and make the issue clear to all, and I would suggest that the clergy also take a page. The message of the clergy should be different, bringing out the morality of our struggle, the struggle of good people who are migrants, and therefore the poorest of the poor and the weakest of the weak.[1]

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[1]**These are excerpts of a speech at an interfaith luncheon of clergy and labor people at Calvary Episcopal Church in Manhattan. Published in Catholic Worker, June 1968