

The following pages were selected from Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa, written by Jacques Levy. This is one of the best books ever written about Cesar Chavez, and is the closest thing available to an autobiography. Mr. Levy enjoyed almost uninvited access to Cesar Chavez for nearly six years, traveling with him, attending meetings with him, working with him, and interviewing him. He also interviewed members of the Chavez family, friends, colleagues, and other key individuals. According to Jacques Levy, this book is "the true story of Cesar Chavez and La Causa -- the truth as perceived by those who lived it and witnessed it." As Cesar Chavez said in a conversation with Mr. Levy, "truth is nonviolence. So everything really comes from truth. Truth is the ultimate. Truth is God. Truth is on our side, even more than justice, because truth can't be changed. It has a way of manifesting itself It has to come out, so sooner or later we'll win."

A second edition of Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa will soon be published. It is highly recommended that students conducting research on Cesar Chavez, has life, has works, as well as has commitment to nonviolence; obtain a copy of Mr. Levy's book. It is the best primary source available.

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Jacques E. Levy

CESAR CHAVEZ
Autobiography of La Causa

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CHAPTER 1

A Step to Freedom

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

The need for radical change is great and urgent, in the cities as well as in the fields, and if we don't succeed, violence will spread. Other movements will try to do it with violence.

But in seeking social change, I am positive nonviolence is the way, morally and tactically, especially in our society where those in power resort to clubs, tear gas, and guns. I have seen nonviolence work many times in many ways. When we organized California's vineyards, for example, it was the growers' violence, their manipulation of the police and the courts, that helped win support for our cause.

We can remain nonviolent because people outside the Movement by and large don't want violence. By remaining nonviolent in the face of violence, we win them to our side, and that's what makes the strength. And we organize that strength to fight for change.

My experiences in the Union had happened to me ten or fifteen times before in CSO. Every time I organized a little group on a smaller scale, the same thing happened. I organized from the ground up, helped people, got them together, and started fighting for what was needed. Pretty soon they were using their power effectively and trying to get things changed.

The Union is the same thing, just on a much bigger scale. What happens next may be even bigger. Out of each experience enough light is generated to illuminate another little stretch. Who knows where it will lead? And who can tell where it started?

CHAPTER 4

Dichos and Consejos

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

I had more happy moments as a child than unhappy moments. Because my parents were middle-aged when they got married, they had a lot of understanding. They had passed that critical age when parents are very young and impatient with children. We didn't know what it was to be excluded. We were a very close family.

Now, in my case, my own family, I am always organizing, going to meetings, and coming home late. Sometimes I am not home for weeks at a time, and when I get home it's so late the children are asleep. Not long ago, it got so bad that my son Paul, who was twelve at the time, reacted. One night when I went to bed, I lay there looking up at the ceiling. I don't know how he reached up there, but right above my bed, where I could not miss it, he wrote "Paul." It's a strong message.

Back in those Arizona days, such reminders were unnecessary, as most of our activities were with the family. In fact, one of the three major influences in my life was my upbringing by my mother and dad and the kind of family we had. The other two were my years of training and experiences in CSO and the experiences in the Union.

I don't think we were babied, because my dad was strict about certain things. He was very stern about obeying him, but very lenient about many other things. If he asked us to do something, we had to do it, and he didn't want to tell us twice. He was affectionate, but in terms that were very different than my mother's. She was affectionate and showed it by kissing and hugging, while my dad would just tug our ears or pat us on the head. He showed his affection differently. For instance, from the time we were very small, we never called my mother at night. If we wanted water or wanted to go to the bathroom, we called our dad. In those days the bathroom was an outhouse a long way from the house toward the hills, and he would carry us there.

My dad also used to build most of the little cars we played with. He taught us how to take a sardine can after it was open, cut the top off, and attach wooden wheels to it with wire or a nail. He also taught us how to make tractors out of wooden spools of thread.

But my dad was usually too busy to spend much time with us. My mom kept the family together. She was the sort of woman who had time for her children, who would talk with us. She used many dichos—proverbs—and they all had a real purpose. “What you do to others, others do to you” was one of them. “He who holds the cow, sins as much as he who kills her.” “If you’re in the honey, some of it will stick to you.” Though she was illiterate, she had a tremendous memory. I think most illiterate persons do because they must rely on their memories.

She also gave us a lot of consejos—advice. She didn’t wait until something went wrong, nor was she scolding when she was doing it. It was part of the training. At first I didn’t understand, but she would make it easy for us. She would say, “He who never listens to consejos will never grow to be old.”

I remember her story of the stone freezing in the boy’s hand. It was a very disobedient son who came home drunk and got real mad at his mother. He picked up a rock and was about to throw it at her when it froze to his hand. Her stories were about obedience and honesty and some of the virtues. There were others that dealt with miracles. The range was very wide.

When I look back, I see her sermons had tremendous impact on me. I didn’t know it was nonviolence then, but after reading Gandhi, St. Francis, and other exponents of nonviolence, I began to clarify that in my mind. Now that I’m older I see she is nonviolent, if anybody is, both by word and deed. She would always talk about not fighting. Despite a culture where you’re not a man if you don’t fight back, she would say, “No, it’s best to turn the other cheek. God gave you senses like eyes and mind and tongue, and you can get out of anything.” She would say, “It takes two to fight.” That was her favorite. “It takes two to fight, and one can’t do it alone.” She had all kinds of proverbs for that. “It’s better to say that he ran from here than to say he died here.” When I was young I didn’t realize the wisdom in her words, but it has been proved to me so many times since. Today I appreciate the advice, and I use quite a few of the dichos, especially in Spanish.

CHAPTER 5

A Need for Faith

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

As we didn't have a church in the valley and it was very difficult to go to Yuma, it was my mother who taught us prayers. Throughout the Southwest and Mexico where there were no priests for a long time, the amazing thing was that people kept the faith. But they were oriented more toward relics and saints. My mother was very religious without being fanatic, and she believed in saints as advocates, as lobbyists, to pray to God for her. Her patron saint was St. Eduvigis.

St. Eduvigis was a Polish duchess who, in the early Christian era, gave up all of her worldly possessions, distributed them among the poor, and became a Christian. On the saint's birthday, October 16, my mom would find some needy person to help and, until recently, she would always invite people to the house, usually hobos. She would go out purposely to look for someone in need, give him something, and never take anything in return. If a man was selling pencils, she would give him some money but wouldn't take a pencil. She would look for people who were hungry to come to the house. Usually they would offer to do some work, like chop wood, in exchange for a meal, but she would refuse because, she said, the gift then was invalid. I think that is a very beautiful custom, and my dad must have felt pretty much the same way because he didn't object.

Mama Tella gave us our formal religious training. She was an orphan who was raised, I understand, in a convent, but she wasn't a nun. She was probably a servant. At the convent she had learned how to read and write in both Latin and Spanish. She was the only one of our four grandparents who was literate.

Mama Tella became blind in her old age. I think she could see a little light and shadows, but she progressively lost her sight. I remember she was very old, almost one hundred when she died in 1937, and she was in bed most of the time. She had a walking cane, and two of the older great-grandchildren or my dad or mother would take her for a walk. But mostly, as I remember her, she was always praying, just praying.

Every evening she would sit in bed, and we would gather in front of her. As we knelt by the doorway to her room, we would join her in the Rosary that seemed to drone on endlessly. We were required to kneel until the prayer was over, and if we started giggling, she would hit us with her cane. After the Rosary she would tell us about a particular saint and drill us in our catechism.

After Mama Tella had prepared us for our first Communion, my father brought my mother, Rita, and me to town one Saturday when he went to buy seed. He dropped us off at the Catholic church. Inside it was dark and silent as we faced toward the altar and crossed ourselves. The pews were empty, and we tiptoed in awe across the dim interior until we found ourselves standing before the priest, who seemed huge, standing in the shadows, his white skin appearing whiter in the dark.

My mother explained our purpose, but the priest shook his head. "They haven't had any religious training. They can't take Communion," he said looking down at us. "They must attend class here in Yuma first."

My mother argued, "They can't because we live out in the valley twenty miles away. We can't travel that far every week."

"Well, they can't make their first Communion unless they do. They have to know their catechism," the priest answered.

My mother was desperate. "Well, ask them something," she pleaded.

We were very nervous. The quiet of the church bore down on us, broken only by the argument between my mother and the priest, and we knew the importance of first Communion. But when the questions came, we knew the answers. Mama Tella's tutoring had been long, intense, and thorough.

Finally the priest was satisfied. He agreed we were ready to join the others for first Communion the next day. But first, he said, we must go to confession. Again I was very frightened. I had been told what confession was, but I didn't think I had anything to confess. I was led into a dark little room and somehow managed to go through with it.

After we left the church, my mother bought us special clothes. It was the first time I wore a tie, and Rita was dressed in white with a veil. I've since seen a picture of us. I couldn't have been over seven or eight. I guess we were frightened because our eyes were wide open, and our hands held the rosary. I had on brand new shoes, a brand new pair of pants, and a new shirt—everything, except my hair wasn't combed.

Since those days, my need for religion has deepened. Today I don't think that I could base my will to struggle on cold economics or on some political doctrine. I don't think there would be enough to sustain me. For me the base must be faith.

It's not necessary to have a religion to act selflessly. I know many agnostics who are more religious in their own way than most people who claim to be believers. While most people drawn toward liberalism or radicalism leave the church, I went the other way. I drew closer to the church the more I learned and understood.

To me, religion is a most beautiful thing. And over the years, I have come to realize that all religions are beautiful. Your religion just happens to depend a lot on your upbringing and your culture.

For me, Christianity happens to be a natural source of faith. I have read what Christ said when he was here. He was very clear in what he meant and knew exactly what he was after. He was extremely radical, and he was for social change.

CHAPTER 7

A Trail of Crops

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

All of us had the same reason why we didn't go to high school. After my dad was in an automobile accident, my mother had to go to the fields and so did Rita. No one had to tell me how bad off we were. I saw how hard they worked in the fields. It was an automatic thing for me to say, I'll go work, and I'll go to high school in two years.

But I never got there.

All of us had this decision—not only us, but most migrants. The only thing that has changed today is that migrants can at least go to a high school for a year or so before they must drop out. In those days, we couldn't even go into high school. But they drop out today for the same reason we didn't even enroll. It's an economic reason entirely.

I can't remember our other migrant years as well as the first two. As we moved around, they blurred. The crops changed and we kept moving. There was a time for planting, and a time for thinning, and an endless variety of harvests up and down the state, along the coast and in the interior valleys.

Some jobs were easy, and some were hard, but the worst—a man killer—was topping sugar beets. I was around sixteen or seventeen when I first topped beets in the Sacramento Valley. Those beets grew big, some of them weighing fifteen pounds. The soil, which was almost always clay, was wet and stuck to the beet as it was pulled out of the ground. My hand would split between the thumb and index finger as I pulled, and the stooping also was really painful.

After uprooting the beet, I topped the green off with a knife like a machete and tossed the beet on a pile between the rows. Then when the truck came, I loaded the beets by hand. Nowadays, all that work is done by machine.

Other hard jobs were thinning lettuce and sugar beets during the winter. Both were just like threads, the plants so small that when I looked at one, there might be ten plants there so close together all I could do was pull them out by hand.

I would chop out a space with the short-handle hoe in the right hand while I felt with my left to pull out all but one plant as I made the next chop. There was a rhythm, it went very fast. It had to, it was all piece rate, so much by acre, so much a row. It was really inhuman.

Every time I see lettuce, that's the first thing I think of, some human being had to thin it. And it's just like being nailed to a cross. You have to walk twisted, as you're stooped over, facing the row, and walking perpendicular to it. You are always trying to find the best position because you can't walk completely sideways, it's too difficult, and if you turn the other way, you can't thin.

Workers are still seen thinning by hand along Highway 101 past Salinas where the big ranches are. But it's a little different today, as they use pregerminated seeds planted in single lines instead of planting strips of seeds along a row. Even with that difference, though, thinning is still rough.

Another hard job was planting onions in January. First we had to take the seedlings, which were little bigger than a match stick, and clean, trim, and pack them in peat moss. We didn't get paid for that. It was done after working hours, so we could spend all day planting.

In the field we pulled the seedlings out of the patch and pushed them into the ground four inches apart, just like dealing cards—one, two, three, four—no rest, just walking fast, bent over, to push the plants in. We had to make the hole with one finger and stick the plant in there. Some farms had good land, which was lucky, but others had bullheads, little thorny things that punctured our fingers. It hurt, but we couldn't stop. We had to make that acre.

The rows were about six inches apart and a quarter-mile long, and the furrows, not more than eighteen inches wide, had rough clods that made it hard to walk. We could make about three dollars a day planting a half a mile. And our backs hurt all day long. Onions and carrots still are the worst paid crops, because they come during the winter when the work is very scarce.

Many things in farm labor are terrible, like going under the vines that are sprayed with sulphur and other pesticides. You have to touch those leaves and inhale that poison. Then there are the heat and the short-handle hoes and the stooping over. So many jobs require stooping. They should find a way of doing this work that will leave the human being whole.

I think it can be done, but it won't be until one of two things happen. Either the employers begin to see the workers as human beings, or the workers organize against the employers and demand changes.

I think this is where the employer shows the most contempt for his workers. For example, I think growers use short-handle hoes because they don't give a damn about human beings, they look at human beings as implements. If they had any consideration for the torture that people go through, they would give up the short-handle hoe. All that stooping is one reason farm workers die before they're fifty.

I remember when I was young, I'd come home, and I'd go to bed for a little while, and I'd be ready to go. But my dad couldn't do that. He'd stay there, and sometimes he couldn't get up to eat. That's true of a lot of men after they get past thirty-five. I remember my mom returning from work and going to bed. She didn't want to hear or see anything.

If the work can't be done with a long hoe, then it shouldn't be done. They can find a way. Growers talk of automation as a way of trying to scare people away from the Union. Others talk of automation in terms of throwing people out of work. But there are some jobs that should be automated, and we should help automate them, jobs that aren't fit for even a beast of burden, much less men.

The beet and cotton industries are now automated, and they should be. I remember young girls weighing 80 or 90 pounds carrying 110, 120 pound sacks of cotton. They carried those sacks not only to the scales but up ladders, way up, and then dumped them. I never understood how they could do it.

At some point in those years I began to take over, but not everything because my dad wouldn't permit it. He knew how much I could handle. The first thing I did was take over the driving, bit by bit, until I was doing it all. Because I had to work on the car and fix it, too, I didn't like that added responsibility. Mechanically I'm no good. But Richard was. He began to learn how to set spark plugs, and do the minor things like lubricate and oil the car.

Then I began to take on other responsibilities, and I liked it. I began to set the quotas and choose the places. If it was a Saturday and there was going to be a dance, the quota would be a little lower so we could get out of there. While my dad never pushed us on the job, pretty soon I was talking about how to work better and faster.

There's a lot more skill in farm labor than most people realize. For example, grapes. Those without skill are going to cut a lot of green ones. Apricots are difficult, too. When the sun hits them early in the morning and late in the afternoon, they all look ripe.

But once they're cut and dumped in the box, they look as green as lettuce. Prunes and wine grapes are different. All that's needed is a good strong back, a lot of stamina, a lot of strength. But apricots, table grapes, plums, and other fruit, where picking is done selectively, take skill.

I made a point of talking to the family about how to do a job better and faster to make more money. We were always finding ways of doing it more easily, telling each other little secrets we discovered.

We did not pick the same crops every year, but there was a pattern. Most winters we spent in Brawley where there were carrots, mustard, and peas. I did cabbage and lettuce in January, picking or working it, tying or loading it on a trailer. Then a little later we capped cantaloupe and watermelon, putting a wax paper over the plant to keep it from freezing and to keep the ground warm, just like an individual hothouse for every plant. When it got warmer, we came back, took the cap off, worked the ground around the plants, and thinned them, using a short-handle hoe.

Probably one of the worst jobs was the broccoli. We were in water and mud up to our necks and our hands got frozen. We had to cut it and throw it on a trailer, cut and throw, cut and throw. We slipped around in the mud, and we were wet. I didn't have any boots, just shoes on. Those crops were in December through March. In January to March there also were the cauliflower, mustard greens, onions, carrots, cabbage, and lettuce.

Then we worked in the watermelon, just picking up the vines which grew in the irrigation ditches and training them away from the ditches. The melons started in May, and I would work in the sheds for a labor contractor who was related to us.

In late May we had two or three options, Oxnard for beans, Beaumont for cherries, or the Hemet area for apricots, places that no longer have much or any of those crops. I think we did all at one time or other. Most of the time my dad would leave it up to us. "Do you think you'll like it?" he would ask.

We started making the apricots in Moorepark where they pick them up from the ground, just like prunes. In San Jose, on the other hand, we had to climb a ladder.

That would be the early part of summer. From there we had all kinds of options. We never did asparagus, and we only did figs once. *The milk of the fig eats through your skin like acid.* Some people put grease on their hands, but we couldn't do that. It was just awful.

We worked in lima beans, corn, and chili peppers, picked fresh lima beans for fifty cents a basket. Then in August we had grapes, prunes, cucumbers, and tomatoes. Those go into September and part of October. We would go before those crops started and wait in a camp until they were ready. For example there were raisin grapes about ten miles beyond Fresno. We had to be there at least a week in advance, or we couldn't get a job. That was a week of lost time, sometimes more, with no pay whatsoever.

Then we did cotton from October through Christmas. I just hated it. It was very hard work, but there was nothing else. After the cotton, just like ducks, we usually went back to Brawley to start with the crops in January.

So we traveled from the Imperial Valley in the south as far north as Sacramento and San Jose.

CHAPTER 11

My Education Starts

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

We thought the only way we could get out of the circle of poverty was to work our way up and send our kids to college. That's the trap most poor people get themselves into. It's easier for a person to just escape, to get out of poverty, than to change the situation.

We weren't saying then, we've got to organize a union. We weren't even asking why these conditions existed. We just felt they shouldn't be like they were. It was just a part of growing up, I guess. But, if later I hadn't encountered CSO, I wouldn't have known what was going on in the world. I got an education there.

Actually my education started when I met Father Donald McDonnell, who came to Sal Si Puedes because there was no Catholic church there, no priest, and hundreds of Mexican-Americans. We were some of the first members that joined his congregation for masses in a little Puerto Rican hall that was just a broken-down little shack.

Father McDonnell was about my age. We became great friends when I began to help him, doing a little carpentry work, cleaning up the place, getting some chairs, and painting some old benches. I also drove for him and helped him recite mass at the bracero camps and in the county jail.

I began to spend more time with Father McDonnell. We had long talks about farm workers. I knew a lot about the work, but I didn't know anything about the economics, and I learned quite a bit from him.

He had a picture of a worker's shanty and a picture of a grower's mansion, a picture of a labor camp and a picture of a high-priced building in San Francisco owned by the same grower. When things were pointed out to me, I began to see, but I didn't learn everything the first time.

Everything he said was aimed at ways to solve the injustice. Later I went with him a couple of times to some strikes near Tracy and Stockton.

And then we did a lot of reading. That's when I started reading the Encyclicals, St. Francis, and Gandhi and having the case for attaining social justice explained. As Father McDonnell followed legislation very closely, he introduced me to the transcripts of the Senate LaFollette Committee hearings held in 1940 in Los Angeles. I remember three or four volumes on agriculture, describing the Associated Farmers, their terror and strikebreaking tactics, and their financing by banks, utilities, and big corporations. These things began to form a picture for me.

When I read the biography of St. Francis of Assisi, I was moved when he went before the Moslem prince and offered to walk through fire to end a bloody war. And I still remember how he talked and made friends with a wolf that had killed several men. St. Francis was a gentle and humble man.

In the St. Francis biography, there was a reference to Gandhi and others who practiced nonviolence. That was a theme that struck a very responsive chord, probably because of the foundation laid by my mother. So the next thing I read after St. Francis was the Louis Fischer biography of Gandhi.

Since then I've been greatly influenced by Gandhi's philosophy and have read a great deal about what he said and did. But in those days I knew very little about him except what I read in the papers and saw in newsreels. There was one scene I never forgot. Gandhi was going to a meeting with a high British official in India. There were throngs of people as he walked all but naked out of his little hut. Then he was filmed in his loincloth, sandals, and shawl walking up the steps of the palace.

Not too long ago I was speaking to a group of Indians including three who had worked with Gandhi. When I said I thought Gandhi was the most perfect man, not including Christ, they all laughed. When I asked them why they laughed, they asked, "What do you mean by perfect?"

I said I don't mean he was perfect like a saint in the sense that he didn't move. I said he was perfect in the sense that he wasn't afraid to move and make things happen. And he didn't ask people to do things he couldn't do himself.

I understand Gandhi more and more. To him duty was the first call. He had no compunction whatsoever about sending someone five hundred miles to take care of something, because he himself was willing to do it. I myself can't do all the things that I ask others to do, but then no one can try to imitate him, because it becomes false. You've got to take the whole philosophy and try to adapt it to your needs. I want to experiment with some of the things he did but not imitate him, because I don't think that can be done.

He had tremendous discipline, both personal and around him. He had all kinds of rules and insisted they be obeyed. So a group of thirty, forty, or a hundred men at the most was very effective, because they worked like a symphony. They were totally loyal to him. He wouldn't put up with anybody being half-loyal or 90 percent loyal. It was 100 percent loyal or nothing at all.

Then, of course, there were more personal things, the whole question of the spirit versus the body. He prepared himself for it by his diet, starving his body so that his spirit could overtake it, controlling the palate, then controlling the sex urge, then using all of his energies to do nothing but service. He was very tough with himself.

He believed that truth was vindicated, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on oneself. That belief comes from Christ himself, the Sermon on the Mount, and further back from Jewish and Hindu traditions. There's no question that by setting such an example, you get others to do it. That is the real essence, but that is difficult. That's what separates ordinary men from great men. And we're all pretty ordinary men in those things.

I like the whole idea of sacrifice to do things. If they are done that way, they are more lasting. If they cost more, then we will value them more.

When we apply Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, it really forces us to think, really forces us to work hard. But it has power. It attracts the support of the people. I've learned that, if any movement is on the move, violence is the last thing wanted. Violence only seems necessary when people are desperate, frustration often leads to violence.

For example, a supermarket boycott is an effective nonviolent weapon. Fire is not. When a fire destroys a supermarket, the company collects the insurance and rebuilds the store bigger and better, and also marks off the loss on its income tax. But picket lines take away customers and reduce business, and there is no way for the store to compensate for that. It is driven by sheer economics to want to avoid picket lines.

Gandhi described his tactics as moral jujitsu—always hitting the opposition off-balance, but keeping his principles. His tactics of civil disobedience haven't hit this country on a massive scale, but they will. Anybody who comes out with the right way of doing it is going to throw the government into a real uproar. If they have a good issue, and they find a good vehicle for civil disobedience, they're going to be devastating.

Just imagine what would happen to this intricate government we have here. Look what happened with Gandhi's salt march and the civil disobedience that followed after it. He boycotted the salt so the government couldn't collect the tax, but then he showed the people how to make their own salt. He boycotted clothes coming in from England, but he turned around and showed the Indians how to make their own clothes.

I learned quite a bit from studying Gandhi, but the first practical steps I learned from the best organizer I know, Fred Ross. I first met him in Sal Si Puedes. He changed my life.

CHAPTER 1

Fred Ross

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

Fred Ross never stopped working. He was very persistent, and it was lucky he was, because I never would have met him otherwise. I was trying to avoid him. It must have been in June 1952 when I came home from work one day, and Helen told me this gringo wanted to see me. That was enough to make me suspicious. We never heard anything from whites unless it was the police, or some sociologist from Stanford, San Jose State, or Berkeley coming to write about *Sal Si Puedes*. They'd ask all kinds of silly questions, like how did we eat our beans and tortillas. We felt it wasn't any of their business how we lived.

Helen was sure it was something good for us, maybe better jobs or more money, as this gringo had gotten our name from Alicia Hernandez, the public health nurse. Helen told me he had promised to be back that evening.

To avoid him I went across the street to Richard's house. Later I asked Helen what happened.

"He's coming back tomorrow," she said.

"Well, I'm not going to be here when he comes," I told her. And I wasn't. I just went to Richard's house again. "He must want something from us," I told Richard.

I watched him drive up, talk to Helen, and leave, then I went home. When Helen told me he was coming back again the next day, I said I wouldn't see him. Helen put her foot down. "Well, this time you tell him I'm not going to lie to him any more."

When Fred arrived the next day, I was watching from the window in Richard's house. As he got out of his old car, he accidentally banged his knee, and it was obvious he hurt it. He was limping as he walked to our house, a tall, thin man in old and worn clothes. I saw Helen pointing out Richard's house. Fred limped across the street and knocked on the door.

I just let him talk, partly listening to him and partly thinking how I could teach him a lesson. He was about twenty years older than I was, and I could see he was sincere, but I couldn't admit it to myself. Somehow that bothered me.

He wanted to set up a meeting at our house as soon as possible.

“How many people do you want?” I asked

“Oh, four or five ”

“How about twenty?”

“Gee, that’d be great ”

I already had a plan in mind. I invited some of the rougher guys I knew and bought some beer. I thought we could show this gringo a little bit of how we felt. We’d let him speak a while, and when I gave them the signal, shifting my cigarette from my right hand to the left, we’d tell him off and run him out of the house. Then we’d be even. But somehow I knew that this gringo had really impressed me, and that I was being dishonest.

When the meeting started, Fred spoke quietly, not rabble-rousing, but saying the truth. He knew our problems as well as we did. There was a creek behind Sal Si Puedes which carried the waste from a packing house nearby. The kids downstream would play in it, and they’d get sores. There were big holes in that creek where the water would collect and stagnate, and where the mosquitoes would breed. He took on the politicians for not doing something about it.

The more he talked, the more wide-eyed I became, and the less inclined I was to give the signal. When a couple of guys who were pretty drunk by that time still wanted to give the gringo the business, we got rid of them. This fellow was making a lot of sense, and I wanted to hear what he had to say.

He told us he was an organizer for CSO, the Community Service Organization, which was working with Mexican-Americans in the cities. Later I would find out that it was Fred Ross who started CSO. He talked about the CSO, and the famous bloody Christmas case in Los Angeles a year earlier where drunken cops beat up some Mexican prisoners. I didn’t know what CSO was, or who this guy Fred Ross was, but I knew about the bloody Christmas case, and so did everybody in that room. Five cops actually had been jailed for brutality. And that miracle was the result of CSO efforts.

Fred did such a good job of explaining how poor people could build power that I could even taste it. I could really feel it. I thought, gee, it’s like digging a hole. There’s nothing complicated about it.

When he finished, I walked out to his car with him and thanked him for coming. I wondered what the next step was.

“I have another meeting now. I don’t suppose you’d like to come?” Fred said.

“Oh, yes, I would!”

And that was it. My suspicions were erased. As time went on, Fred became sort of my hero. I saw him organize, and I wanted to learn. Right away I began to see that organizing was difficult. It wasn't a party. I began to see all of the things that he did, and I was amazed—how he could handle one situation and have a million things going in his mind at the same time.

I wanted to do it just as he did, so I began to learn. It was a beautiful part of my life. And eventually, like him, I became an organizer.

FRED ROSS RECALLS

I was born in San Francisco in 1910, so when I met Cesar I was barely forty-two, and I only had six years of organizing behind me. All that I had organized then was the Los Angeles CSO. That gives Cesar encouragement. He says, "Look what Fred Ross did after he was forty-two." By the time Cesar was forty-two, he had seventeen years of experience organizing.

Of course, at the beginning, I didn't know anything as far as setting up a mass-based organization. I had never done it. But house meetings worked. Cesar later used the house-meeting technique to start the Union.

First I'd hold small house meetings for three weeks, building up to the big organizing meeting when we'd set up temporary officers. Then we'd organize through house meetings for several more weeks before the second organizing meeting. We then would have a working CSO chapter.

Later in CSO there were two broad-based programs we did wherever we went—voter registration and citizenship classes. We never left a place until we had put on both of those power-building programs.

I'd been working in San Jose over three weeks, and we'd already had the first organizing meeting before I met Cesar. I remember he was interested in what was in it for farm workers. That first house meeting on June 9 lasted about two hours. Just before I broke away I said I had another meeting at the Flores place. Cesar volunteered to show me the way.

Well, he was hooked. He wanted to move on and see how other people reacted. Although he was still but a semiparticipant, at least he saw the way people would open up at a house meeting, especially when the meeting was relatively small so that they could open up without being embarrassed to say what was on their minds about their problems and the neighborhood.

The night after I met Cesar, we were going to start on the voter registration drive, and he volunteered right away. That was another proof of his interest. We only had one deputy registrar then, and I'd already gotten fifteen to seventeen persons to act as bird dogs going up and down the street pulling the people out to go down to the corner and register. Cesar said he would be there the next night, and he was.

At the very first meeting, I was very much impressed with Cesar. I could tell he was intensely interested, a kind of burning interest rather than one of those inflammatory things that lasts one night and is then forgotten. He asked many questions, part of it to see if I really knew, putting me to the test. But it was much more than that.

He understood it almost immediately, as soon as I drew the picture. He got the point—the whole question of power and the development of power within the group. He made the connections very quickly between the civic weakness of the group and the social neglect in the barrio, and also conversely, what could be done about that social neglect once the power was developed.

He also showed tremendous perseverance right from the very beginning. Although Helen was quite sick at the time with a kidney disorder, he was the only one in the whole organization that came out every night for two months to push that voter registration drive. For whatever reason, all of his actions were invested with a tremendous amount of urgency.

He felt pretty hurt, I remember, when others started falling by the wayside, people that started out with him, that we had high hopes for.

I kept a diary in those days. And the first night I met Cesar, I wrote in it, "I think I've found the guy I'm looking for." It was obvious even then.

CHAPTER 2

Are You a Communist?

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

Since I didn't have any regular farm job, I was putting all my time between jobs into the CSO's voter registration project. The June primaries were coming up and the general election. That was the year Eisenhower first ran against Adlai Stevenson. But there were many important local races, too.

When Fred came in to start the registration drive, he had a terrible time getting one deputy registrar deputized. Although they were nonpartisan offices, deputy registrars throughout California were Republicans. They were organized to prevent Chicanos from voting. There were restrictions on everything. We couldn't speak Spanish when we were registering, we couldn't go door to door, we couldn't register except in daylight hours, we couldn't register on Sundays.

Today, the idea of getting everyone to register is accepted. We fought for legislation in Sacramento and helped correct these things. But in those days, there was a lot of resistance. Fred put on a big fight and finally got Jessie De La O whose father owned the little corner grocery in Sal Si Puedes. After Jessie was chosen, Fred took me on as a bird dog to knock on doors and find the people who were not registered.

I'd never done that before, and when I knocked on the first door and a Chicano lady came out, I was so frightened I couldn't talk. She stared at me. She hardly knew me, but she knew my mother.

"Well?" she said looking at me.

I was having a difficult time explaining what we were doing.

Finally she smiled, "Okay, we're going to go register. We know you're registering people."

After leaving her house, I was embarrassed and mad at myself for being so frightened. Instead of going to the next house, I went to a home where there were some rough characters I knew. They started kidding me, but I could communicate with them. Most of them either had been to San Quentin prison or would end up

there When I made a pitch for registration, they laughed and called me "the politician" But I got one of the married sisters and her husband to register

After that I went back to the second house Little by little, I got confidence In about three days I was doing okay By then it was a challenge I wouldn't let anybody get away without registering, I'd go into all kinds of arguments, but mostly I'd just sit in the door and not take no for an answer I had a little game going with myself to beat the other volunteers

The volunteers were mostly college guys who always had to go to meetings or go study, while I had nothing else to do but register I couldn't understand why they didn't find it as important as I did

We began to lose people After Fred left, I was soon the only one going out So he made me chairman of the registration drive, and I changed the tactics Instead of recruiting college guys, I got all my friends, my beer-drinking friends With them it wasn't a question of civic duty, they helped me because of friendship, and because it was fun Soon the registration drive was going along very well One of the men running for the Board of Supervisors became very friendly, and we were able to get five more deputy registrars

The drive lasted eighty-five days, and I missed only one because Fred insisted that I take off Part of that time I was working, but even when I worked, I'd take a shower afterward or sometimes just gobble up some food and take off to help register people. I think we ended up registering about six thousand persons by the November elections

We had registered so many that the Republican Central Committee decided to intimidate the people that were voting for the first time Republicans at the polls challenged voters "Are you a citizen? Read from here!" People were scared away Fred came to help us, and we tried unsuccessfully to get people to go back and vote It was a disaster

After the election, we had an emergency CSO board meeting, and Fred said, "We've got to send a wire to J Howard McGrath, the US attorney general, to protest the Republican harassment."

Fred asked the president, Herman Gallegos, to sign the wire, but Herman said he couldn't because he was working with the welfare department, and this would jeopardize his job He went down the line, and everybody said no They were all professional people except for Mike Aguilar, who worked in a planing mill,

and myself I remember getting very upset I didn't say anything, but inside of me I lost all respect for them

Fred didn't even ask me to sign I was looked upon as probably the least person on the board Finally I raised my hand and said, "I'll sign it "

Fred looked at me, "You will?"

"Yeah, I'll sign it "

"Okay. Fine! Fine!"

We also put a big blast in the paper Then the Republicans accused us of registering illegals and dead people We called them racists It was a big fight, my first fight with this power structure, and my name started getting in the paper.

At the time I was back working in a lumber yard where we unloaded rough lumber and stored it I had an Italian foreman who would take me, on company time, over to his house for a drink of wine, cheese, and bread He liked me because, when he'd ask me for something, I would get the job done

One day he warned me, "Compagno, you've been getting into a lot of trouble Compagno, these politics are very bad, you know."

Down at the yard some strange things began to happen, too. Most of the people were Okies, except for one that worked there during the summer He was an undergraduate who knew what was happening and liked it But all the others, when I'd come in, would take their hats off and say, "Good morning, politician" It was funny I wouldn't respond They weren't being mean, they were just puzzled by what was going on

Then their attitude toward me began to change It's a weird thing how the chemistry works I think this is how the reaction to leadership begins to develop Leadership many times is only a mental condition, more than anything else They began to come to me with little problems that they had.

The first was an Anglo and older than I was, but he wanted to tell me that he and his wife were breaking up I felt so bad and incompetent, as I didn't know what to do What could I do? Since he wanted to tell me, I worked with him, and listened to all his problems, but I couldn't even make any suggestions. I didn't know how to handle the problem Then others began coming to me

There were other signs, too Often there was good-natured roughhousing, but they began not to roughhouse with me any more

Then the supervisor, not the Italian foreman but the guy at the top, would come and ask me how things were going. As I look back, I can see he didn't understand very well what I was doing, and I didn't understand why their attitudes were changing either.

One day the FBI came looking for me at work. The foreman came rushing out "Goddamn! Compagno, you've got your ass in a lot of trouble for fooling around with goddamn politics! Compagno, the FBI wants to see you!"

I was scared. What had I done? I knew I had never done anything wrong, but who knows? These two young guys showed me their FBI credentials in front of everybody. Everyone just stopped working and looked at me.

The agents started asking me a lot of questions about Communism. I said, "You know damn well I'm not a Communist!"

But what they really wanted to talk to me about was the complaint CSO had filed against the Republican Central Committee. So I relaxed, and we talked about a half hour. Then I went back to the line where the guys wanted to know what had happened. I wouldn't tell them.

Later that day the FBI agents took me in their car for a meeting with members of the Republican Central Committee which turned into a shouting match. That's the first time I started shouting at Anglos, shouting back at them.

The agent in charge was trying to work the thing out. Finally he said, "Well, we have enough of these problems in Mississippi and the South, and we don't want to have any of this nonsense here in California."

I felt pretty good then. It was really reassuring. The Republicans were told that they couldn't intimidate people at the polls, and that the investigation would continue. Actually nothing came of the investigation except that the FBI put the heat on the Republicans.

When the agents brought me back to the yard about 3:30, we went into a little diner where most of the plant people came for coffee after work. The workers came by at 4:00, and it became a major story around there.

Then the Republicans started to red-bait me, which made the papers again. That red-baiting was the first time for me, but this was the peak of the Senator Joseph McCarthy era when many people were being accused falsely. When the charges against me hit the press, there were repercussions.

At the plant, one of my very good friends was a poor, illiterate Greek who didn't know how to drive and didn't want to take the bus. I can still see him, very short and with very baggy pants. I went way out of my way to take him home in my car every day, and on Saturdays he would call me to take him and his family shopping.

When someone told him about the attack on me, he came to give me a lesson on how bad Communism was. I stood there, not knowing what he was talking about until he said the paper was charging that I was a Communist or working with a Communist organization.

I was furious at the Republicans that had said that and tried to tell the Greek that I wasn't a Communist. But he wouldn't believe me.

At work he always got his lunch pail and thermos bottle about a half hour before work ended and put it in my car. That day, we were sorting lumber, and he had everything near him. When the whistle blew, he grabbed his stuff, put his head down, and started across the yard to the opposite street where he could catch the bus.

He rode that bus for about two weeks. Then I got some of the Catholic priests in town together with the help of Father McDonnell, and they put out a statement that we weren't Communists. The next day he wanted to ride with me again.

The Chicanos also wouldn't talk to me. They were afraid. The newspaper had a lot of influence during those McCarthy days. Anyone who organized or worked for civil rights was called a Communist. Anyone who talked about police brutality was called a Communist.

Everywhere I went to organize they would bluntly ask, "Are you a Communist?"

I would answer, "No."

"How do we know?"

"You don't know. You know because I tell you."

And we would go around and around on that. If it was somebody who was being smart, I'd tell them to go to hell, but if it was somebody that I wanted to organize, I would have to go through an explanation.

Later I found out that when they learned I was close to the church, they wouldn't question me so much. So I'd get the priests to come out and give me their blessing. In those days, if a priest said something to the Mexicans, they would say fine. It's different now.

Because I was being attacked, the liberals began to seek me out. The few liberals in San Jose asked what they could do. We struck up a friendship which we still have. From then on, every little place I went, I met the liberal lawyer, the liberal teacher, the liberal social worker. We would get together, and I got an education. I was pretty green, and I was impressed by almost anyone. I wanted to learn.

I began to grow and to see a lot of things that I hadn't seen before. My eyes opened, and I paid more attention to political and social events. I also began to read in a more disciplined way, concentrating at first on labor, on biographies of labor organizers like John L. Lewis and Eugene Debs and the Knights of Labor.

CHAPTER 8

Recruiting Volunteers

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

It's so hard to maintain a nonviolent approach to doing things, but within our Union, we are still succeeding. To explain what I mean, I have to go into another phase of it.

In order for us to have a nonviolent movement, the first thing the leadership must say is, "If we can't organize the farm workers, it's not their fault, it's our own fault." If we start from that premise, I think we're safe, because the easiest thing for organizers to do is to damn the people or damn the opposition.

The second thing we must say is, "We can't win unless we know how to organize." So we need good organizers who are not afraid to act and not afraid to make mistakes. We must give them a lot of freedom and get them to accept other people's ideas. Nonviolence has one big demand, the need to be creative, and the ideas come from the people.

And the third thing we must say is, "We must win in spite of the opposition." We know that every time we knock down one obstacle, we have five more in front of us, because the opposition has got almost everything that society has to offer in terms of structured institutions and power turned against us.

When we encounter obstacles, I don't think our job is to knock them out. I think our job is just to do enough to get them out of our way, so we can keep on going toward our goal.

If someone commits violence against us, it is much better—if we can—not to react against the violence, but to react in such a way as to get closer to our goal. People don't like to see a nonviolent movement subjected to violence, and there's a lot of support across the country for nonviolence. That's the key point we have going for us. We can turn the world if we can do it nonviolently.

So, if we can just show people how they can organize nonviolently, we can't fail. It has never failed when it's been tried. If the effort gets out of hand, it's from lack of discipline.

If we can develop some confidence in an organizer's ability to organize, the organizer's tendency to use violence is much less

Persons who don't have any confidence get discouraged and then get into the trap of thinking that violence is the cure-all. But once that first act of violence is committed, they get on the defensive. And no one wins, that I know of, on the defensive. For example, if they get arrested for violence, then they must redirect their efforts from taking on the opposition to defending themselves.

In the beginning, the staff people didn't thoroughly understand the whole idea of nonviolence, so I sent out the word to get young people who had been in the South and knew how to struggle nonviolently. That's how we got our first volunteers—people from the Congress of Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who had been in the Civil Rights Movement there. They were very good at teaching nonviolent tactics.

CHAPTER 7

The Power of Nonviolence

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

To us the boycott of grapes was the most near-perfect of nonviolent struggles, because nonviolence also requires mass involvement. The boycott demonstrated to the whole country, the whole world, what people can do by nonviolent action.

Nonviolence in the abstract is a very difficult thing to comprehend or explain. I'd read a lot, but all of it was in the abstract. It's difficult to carry the message to people who aren't involved. Nonviolence must be explained in context.

People equate nonviolence with inaction—with not doing anything—and it's not that at all. It's exactly the opposite.

In his autobiography, Malcolm X said, "I believe it's a crime for anyone who is being brutalized to continue to accept that brutality without doing something to defend himself. If that's how Christian philosophy is interpreted, if that's what Gandhian philosophy teaches, well then I will call them criminal philosophies."

But Gandhi never said not to do anything. He said exactly the opposite. He said, "Do something! Offer your life!" He said, "If you really want to do something, be willing to die for it." That's asking for the maximum contribution.

Often only talk results when a person with social concern wants to do something for the underdog nonviolently. But just talking about change is not going to bring it about. Talk just gives people an out. Generally what happens is that people will study nonviolence, read books, go to seminars where they discuss nonviolence, and attend endless meetings. In most cases, they find some satisfaction in this and think they somehow are accomplishing something. But all the while, and right across town, the pot is brewing.

Reading is not bad, but thinking they made a great accomplishment is bad. They're kidding themselves. These people can't be effective. Nonviolence becomes just an ideology, something to write about, or read about, or talk about while still being very comfortable. The ideology becomes a luxury, not a way of life. And nothing can be changed while being comfortable. Life is not made that way.

Nonviolence is action. Like anything else, though, it's got to be organized. There must be rules. There must be people following.

The whole essence of nonviolent action is getting a lot of people involved, vast numbers doing little things. It's difficult to get people involved in a picket line, because it takes their time. But any time a person can be persuaded not to eat a grape—and we persuaded millions not to eat grapes—that's involvement, that's the most direct action, and it's set up in such a way that everybody can participate.

Nonviolence also has one big demand—the need to be creative, to develop strategy. Gandhi described it as moral jujitsu. Always hit the opposition off balance, but keep your principles.

Strategy for nonviolence takes a tremendous amount of our time—strategy against the opposition, and strategy to strengthen our support. We can't let people get discouraged. If there's no progress, they say nonviolence doesn't work. They begin to go each and everywhere. And it's only when they are desperate that people think violence is necessary.

Of course, it isn't. If any movement is on the move, violence is the last thing that's wanted.

Naturally, nonviolence takes time. But poverty has been with us since the beginning of time. We just have to work for improvement. *I despise exploitation and I want change, but I'm willing to pay the price in terms of time.* There's a Mexican saying, "*Hay más tiempo que vida*"—There's more time than life. We've got all the time in the world.

Some great nonviolent successes have been achieved in history. Moses is about the best example, and the first one. Christ also is a beautiful example, as is the way the Christians overcame tyranny. They needed over three hundred years, but they did it. The most recent example is Gandhi. To me that's the most beautiful one. We can examine it more closely because it happened during our lifetime. It's fantastic how he got so many people to do things, *which is the whole essence of nonviolent action.*

Nonviolence has the power to attract people and to generate power. That's what happened to Gandhi. Besides millions of Indians, he had many Englishmen, both in England and even India siding with him.

By and large, people oppose violence. So when government or growers use violence against us, we strategize around it. We can respond nonviolently, because that swings people to our side, and that gives us our strength.

First, of course, the workers have to understand nonviolence. Gandhi once said he'd rather have a man be violent than be a coward. I agree. If he's a coward, then what good is he for anyone? But it is our job to see he's not a coward. That's really the beginning point of our training.

And while the philosophy of nonviolence covers physical, verbal, and moral behavior, we haven't achieved that goal. If we can achieve it, we're saints—which we're not. We're still working on eliminating physical violence, though that isn't all, by any stretch of the imagination. After workers begin to understand physical nonviolence among people, then we also apply it to property and go on from there.

It's like a leader marching at the head of a column, going up and down hills. Pretty soon there are forks and cross-streets, and the leader can't be followed because they can't see him. They don't know where he went. The important thing is to bring them along. The important thing is not to get lost.

There came a point in 1968 when we were in danger of losing part of our column. Because of a sudden increase in violence against us, and an apparent lack of progress after more than two years of striking, there were those who felt that the time had come to overcome violence by violence.

I told them I expected the Teamsters to buy people off or to try to intimidate us. "But we're not afraid of them. Nonviolence becomes more powerful as violence becomes more pronounced. You'll see how our tactics work."

CHAPTER 8

The Miracle of the Fast

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

There was demoralization in the ranks, people becoming desperate, more and more talk about violence. People meant it, even when they talked to me. They would say, "Hey, we've got to burn these sons of bitches down. We've got to kill a few of them."

Several packing sheds had been burned. We had a very narrow escape when one of our guys was run over by a truck. The people there wanted to do the truck driver in. I even had to confiscate a few guns off the picket line.

I thought that I had to bring the Movement to a halt, do something that would force them and me to deal with the whole question of violence and ourselves. We had to stop long enough to take account of what we were doing.

So I stopped eating. It was a Thursday. Then I didn't eat on Friday or Saturday or Sunday. LeRoy Chatfield, a former Christian Brother, who was, I guess, the only one who knew I was fasting, started coming with me and helping me through the first few days. He would drive me home and pick me up and hear about all the pains I had and all the nightmares about food.

Those first three days LeRoy brought me Diet Rite, but I was worried whether Diet Rite had any food value, because then that wasn't a clean fast. After that I took only water.

I didn't know how long I was going to fast.

After four days, I called a meeting of all the strikers and the staff at Filipino Hall to announce what I was doing. I just made a short speech. I told them I thought they were discouraged, because they were talking about short cuts, about violence. They were getting so mad with the growers, they couldn't be effective anymore.

Then I talked about violence. How could they oppose the violence of the war in Vietnam, I asked, but propose that we use violence for our Cause? When the Civil Rights Movement turned to violence, I said, it was the blacks who suffered, who were killed, who had their homes burned. If we turned to violence, it would be the poor who would suffer.

"But," I said, "it's not enough to say, 'I'm not going to be violent' We have to show our commitment by working harder" I said that our work habits had been destroyed People were bitching, they were staying in the office, they weren't going out to the picket lines

Then I said I was going to stop eating until such time as everyone in the strike either ignored me or made up their minds that they were not going to be committing violence I didn't wait for reactions, I just walked out of Filipino Hall and headed for the co-op building at the Forty Acres

I thought that if I fasted at home, Helen would be burdened with people coming to the house at all hours That decision was hard on both of us—I liked Helen to be with me all the time, and she was split two ways, either away from the kids or from me But fasting at Forty Acres was a good decision for other reasons that I didn't know then, but that became obvious as the fast continued

While I was walking the few miles to the Forty Acres, Bob Bustos joined me Helen stayed at the meeting for a while, then caught up by car and walked the rest of the way with me.

She told me I was crazy, and nobody would appreciate what I was doing I said I didn't want anybody to appreciate it

"What about the family? Don't you think that we count?"

"Well, that's not going to work," I told her "I made up my mind, and the best thing you can do is to support me and help me out"

After we argued a while, it hit her that I was really serious. "Well, I should know when you make up your mind, you're stubborn, nothing will change it I might as well just go along with it," she said. "But remember I don't like the whole idea I think it's ridiculous"

I didn't realize it then, because I was too worried about myself, but Helen was stunned. She thought I was going to die because of the fast

Meanwhile, at Filipino Hall, the meeting was thrown into an uproar After I walked out, people began to fight among themselves LeRoy finally said, "The hell with it I'm not going to stay here fighting while we have a guy fasting He needs a place to stay, he doesn't even have a bed. He doesn't have any water You know the damn place is as hot as hell He needs a fan in there I don't know about you guys, but I'm going to go out there and help him" And he left

Andy Imutan, one of the Filipino leaders, got up and began trying to bring the two sides together We lost several persons who felt I was playing Jesus Christ, but we pulled all the others together.

JERRY COHEN RECALLS

LeRoy told us the night before the meeting that Cesar was fasting, and I got pissed off because of the Perelli-Minetti experience. We didn't know then that he was fasting, so I went up to Marysville to negotiate a contract before completing the Perelli-Minetti agreement. If I had known, I could have completed the agreement a lot sooner.

So now, when we heard he was fasting, about three of us cooked up this idea—the only way to get him off it was not to eat until he started eating. We figured we could get everybody in the offices involved.

Cesar had no way of knowing our plan. But at the Filipino Hall meeting, he gave us two examples. He said, "Now this is a fast, which means that I'm not doing it to put pressure on anybody." If we were negotiating with the growers, he said that he'd ask that the negotiations be stopped during the fast because they might take it as pressure.

"Another example," he said, "is if any of you were"—and I don't know if he said "chicken shit enough to," but some words like that—"for instance, tell me that you weren't going to eat until I started eating, that would be a hunger strike, and I wouldn't agree to pressure like that. This is not a hunger strike in the sense that that would be a hunger strike."

That really shocked me, because he psyched out the scene. He's very smart. He just took the sails right out of our plan.

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

At the Forty Acres, I stayed in bed most of the time to conserve my energy. Every little drop counts. I also wanted to change the atmosphere, but I didn't want to stop working. Lying down I could still do a lot of work and see a lot of people. And, as I also wanted to receive Communion every day, we had a daily mass and meeting.

After about three or four days, the spirit was definitely there. The Filipino women and the strikers painted the co-op windows with bright colors. They looked like stained glass. Things began to get cleaned up. Everybody began to get things done on their own. They began to think how to help.

The rest was just like a miracle—not the fast, but the things that it did to people. It jolted everybody around. We got more than I ever bargained for. The good effects were way beyond my

dreams. The work schedule began to pick up, dedication increased, and the whole question of using violence ended immediately. Of course, the sheds continued to burn, but we found out later some volunteer firemen were burning them.

There were many other effects. The reaction from the opposition was ridiculous. People in town, the opponents, were saying, "Oh, that man's not fasting, he's just fooling everybody. We know he has a nurse there, and she feeds him." They said Marion Moses, one of my nurses, had gone out and chased jack rabbits at night and fried them for me.

I thought their comments were a compliment. Their reaction proved to me that a fast was powerful, and by refusing to admit I was fasting, they were admitting that fasting was a good thing.

The fast also affected the grape boycott, which became stronger. And a lot of people on the boycott also fasted. So did many others. Marshall Ganz fasted for ten days. Dolores fasted, Richard fasted. Besides fasting, they also saw all kinds of work that had to be done, and they did it.

Then the fast affected other people. There was a very good response from the church and some of the labor leaders. Walter Reuther came and gave us fifty thousand dollars for a building.

Once we started with the religious service, the fast affected our members in a very religious way, supporting me. They brought many offerings, the largest number being crucifixes and Christ in many forms. Many others brought the Virgin of Guadalupe, while the third most popular gift was St. Martin's Pores, the black saint from Peru, who is the most popular saint in Latin America.

There was a lot of personal communication in the fast. The people came, and I would say one word or two, and they understood. To some it was very emotional. They were very worried about my dying.

While the fast had tremendous effect and developed strength in many ways, very few people supported me—wanted me to keep fasting. Most people were worried, though for different reasons. The doctor was worried because he was in charge if something happened to me. The staff was concerned because of friendship, and because they felt many things had to stop while I fasted. Very few people could see all the spiritual and psychological and political good that was coming out of it, good which I had no idea was going to happen.

As the days passed the pressures increased for me to stop fasting. Helen and Richard were very worried. They tried to argue me out of it. "You can't do this," Richard would say. "What happens if you die?" And any time there was an opening, Helen would take

a good shot at me, wanting me to stop. She began to organize pressure against me—not consciously—but by expressing her fears.

LeRoy, however, really saw the opportunity, saw what it was going to do for the Union. He wasn't that worried about my health.

I went through different stages. In the beginning I had nightmares about food, about eating chicken or good vegetables. Then I would wake up to find I hadn't eaten anything, and I was still hungry. Then I went through the hunger pains, the headaches, cleaning myself out. It was a very difficult period.

After about seven days, I got away from all the physical pain. I did not want food. I saw it and rejected it. And I was surprised how little sleep I needed, only two or three hours of it at one time. I spent more time awake than sleeping.

It wasn't until later that the other pains came, the leg pains and back pains. I think that because of a lack of calcium, I began to draw calcium from my bones. The pains in my joints were horrible. But that was later, after more than two weeks of not eating.

After seven days it was like going into a different dimension. I began to see things in a different perspective, to retain a lot more, to develop tremendous powers of concentration.

I had a lot of time to examine my past, and I was able to develop self-criticism and examination. I began to see that there were more important things than some of the problems that upset me, such as my administrative problems. I lost most of my emotional attachment to them.

It wasn't that saving my soul was more important than the strike. On the contrary, I said to myself, if I'm going to save my soul, it's going to be through the struggle for social justice.

DOLORES HUERTA RECALLS

We arrived in New York about January 20, and Cesar went on the fast February 15. We all got hit with it suddenly, because he didn't tell anybody until he had been fasting for about five days. When I heard about it, I vomited, and I know the women on the boycott in New York broke down and started crying. I think I lost eight pounds the first week of his fast. All of us understood the religious aspect of it, so we had a priest come over from Brooklyn the next Sunday and give us this special mass.

Fred reacted very strongly, too, because I think Fred probably loves Cesar more than anybody in the world—maybe even more than his wife and children.

Some people reacted the other way, they just missed the whole point of the thing. A lot of people thought Cesar was trying to play God, that this guy really was trying to pull a saintly act.

Poor Cesar! They just couldn't accept it for what it was. I know it's hard for people who are not Mexican to understand, but this is part of the Mexican culture—the penance, the whole idea of suffering for something, of self-inflicted punishment. It's a tradition of very long standing. In fact, Cesar has often mentioned in speeches that we will not win through violence, we will win through fasting and prayer.

I wasn't in Delano at all during the fast, but a lot of unpleasant things happened there at that time in terms of the organization. Tony Orendan, who was the secretary-treasurer of the Union, was very cynical against the church. He was one of the guys that was a leader in all of the conflicts that took place when Cesar went on the fast. There's an awful lot of bigotry even among Mexicans, especially the ones from Mexico.

But the reaction was widespread. Sometime after the fast started, Fred and I were talking on the phone to Saul Alinsky, who said he had told Cesar how embarrassing it was to the Industrial Areas Foundation for Cesar to go on that fast.

And I said, "Well, you should be glad that he didn't do it while he was still working for you."

Alinsky said, "We've had a terrible time trying to explain it."

And then Fred—you just can't say anything against Cesar without Fred reacting—said, "Yea, Saul, but you don't know what a good organizing technique that was, because by that fast he was able to unify the farm workers all over the state of California. Prior to that fast, there had been a lot of bickering and backbiting and fighting and little attempts at violence. But Cesar brought everybody together and really established himself as the leader of the farm workers."

And Saul was at a loss for words.

But that was the reaction of many liberals and radicals. Cesar feels that liberals are liberal right up to the steps of the Catholic church. Guys can be liberal about homosexuality, about dope, about capital punishment, about everything but the Catholic church. There the liberalism ends. So he doesn't want to feed the bigotry that the average person has against the church. He tries to overcome that bigotry by his example.

CHAPTER 9

“To Be a Man Is to Suffer for Others”

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

It's hard to remember all that happened during the fast, but I remember this group of farm workers who came from a long ways to visit, really perplexed by the whole thing and very worried.

Every day the pressure on me increased to end the fast. It came from all directions. Members talked one to the other, then there were constant delegations. “You've got to stop! You've got to stop!” The fast began to really affect them emotionally.

Senator Robert Kennedy sent me a wire of concern. He asked me to consider the consequences of what would happen to the Movement if my health failed. There were many other telegrams and letters. The pressures were a tremendous drama on me.

My doctors were extremely worried about my lack of proteins. At first I didn't want to let them examine me. Finally I agreed that a doctor could check me, but that he couldn't X-ray or take blood out of me.

The doctor found it very hard to accept those restrictions. But I felt that if he examined me and said I was in very bad shape, and I then stopped the fast, there would be no risks. I also would feel I stopped because I didn't want to make much of a sacrifice. And if he told me I was in perfect shape, there still would be no risk. Without the element of risk, I would be hypocritical. The whole essence of penance—which I'm a fool for because I think it works—would be taken away.

Maybe I was in bad shape, but I thought I could go for a few days more, and since I wasn't hungry, I had no intentions of eating.

DOLORES HUERTA RECALLS

At one point I talked to Congressman Philip Burton's assistant, Chuck Hurley, who is a very good friend. Chuck told me LeRoy Chatfield called him. “He wants the congressman to send Cesar a telegram asking him to stop the fast,” he said.

I called Jim Drake to find out what was going on "Well, Dolores," Jim said, "all I can say is I think if Cesar wants to fast, that's his business, and I happen to agree with him on it, but I'm in the minority"

I think LeRoy thought Cesar was damaging his health, and, of course, he was right In fact, I later apologized to Leroy for criticizing his actions

Peggy McGivern, who was the other nurse taking care of Cesar, was worried about his health, too, but Peggy also is a very strong Catholic She told me she just felt Cesar wasn't being told the truth about what was happening to him, and that they were just trying to scare him off the fast

She was right, really, because they were worried about Cesar's spine degenerating, and that never really did happen. He had muscle problems which the fast aggravated because he wasn't getting protein or the proper exercise

When Cesar finally decided to end the fast, Kennedy was asked to come It took quite a bit of work He wanted to come, but I think that he was afraid people might interpret it as a political expediency At the time, the political scene was tight Senator Eugene McCarthy had announced that he was running for president against President Lyndon Johnson, and there was a lot of pressure on Kennedy to enter the race.

We went down to see his assistant in New York and asked him to ask Kennedy to come Carter Burden's reaction was, "I don't think he should go I think it's terrible to use a religious ceremony like a mass for that purpose."

But in the end, he did come

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

I think my biggest success in life was being able to go without food for twenty-five days I don't think I could top that

On the day I broke my fast, I was pretty much out of it, I was so weak We had a mass at the county park and used a flat-bed truck for the altar

Kennedy arrived at Union headquarters at Forty Acres before the mass started He was uneasy. "What do you say to a guy who's on a fast?" he asked someone before he came into my room He was in there only briefly, and neither of us had much to say

At the park, I was so much out of it, all I felt was a lot of people pushing and trying to get closer to the altar It was hot I remember arriving, a lot of people trying to say hello, trying to hug me while I was being held up because my legs were so weak

The mass was said by many priests, and many nuns came to distribute the bread. I couldn't see the crowd because I was sitting down, but it was certainly one of the largest gatherings in Delano at the county park.

I remember the TV people were there, and one cameraman couldn't get in while Kennedy was giving me a piece of bread. When he finally did, he told Kennedy, "This is probably the most ridiculous request I have ever made. Could you give him a piece of bread again?"

Because I was too weak, I couldn't even speak my thanks, but Jim Drake expressed my thoughts which I had put down earlier.

"Our struggle is not easy," I wrote. "Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful, and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons."

"When we are really honest with ourselves," I concluded, "we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life."

"I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!"

When it was over, they put me on a mattress in the station wagon. I had been up about two hours, so the moment I hit that mattress, I went to sleep.

Jim Drake told me that after the mass, the people crowded around Kennedy, telling him he had to run for president. Kennedy was really moved. When he got in Jim's car to be driven to the airport, he turned to Jim and said, "You know, I might just do that." It was the first indication we had that he might run.

CHAPTER 13

Surprise in Sacramento

FROM JACQUES LEVY'S NOTEBOOK

September 15, 1974—New York Times Magazine feature article, "Is Chavez Beaten?" by Winthrop Griffith, is one of many that appear in magazines, newspapers, and TV features, all suggesting the end of Cesar Chavez and the UFW

"No one who sympathizes with him," writes Griffith, "wants to admit that he is defeated. Some of his Anglo supporters still pace the sidewalks in front of city supermarkets, imploring customers to boycott the grapes and lettuce inside, but their posture now indicates to the skeptical outsider that they are engaged in a lonely vigil, not a dynamic national movement."

February 22, 1975—The UFW starts a 110-mile march from San Francisco to Modesto, headquarters of the E & J Gallo winery. Other contingents head out from Fresno and Stockton, thus converging on Modesto from the north, south, and west

One week later, joined by supporters from throughout the state, they march past the boycotted winery's headquarters and end the march at an enthusiastic rally. Police estimate the crowd at fifteen thousand, far greater than the final day of the original march to Sacramento in 1966

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

The march to Modesto was Fred Ross, Junior's, idea. He had been working for the Union for about five years, part of the second generation which is now in the Movement. At the time, he was in charge of the Northern California boycott operation. I didn't discourage the march, but I wasn't too enthusiastic about it because I didn't think it would be very successful.

On the last day, I was expecting about two or three thousand people, but when I started getting the reports, I began to think that this would be a good shot at legislation.

Before our convention in 1973, I had told the executive board, "It's time that we go on the offensive on legislation, that we talk about a Bill of Rights for farm workers." We gave the project to

the legal department, and Jerry Cohen made a list of all the issues as he saw them. Then he met with the board and with me for many sessions. We went over all the issues. I also met with the field office staffs, the people who had been involved in the strikes, the workers, and we just touched every single base we could. There was tremendous input. So Jerry finally drew up an ideal bill.

By the time of the Modesto march, Jerry Brown was governor, and the political climate had improved. Nothing could have been as bad as Governor Reagan. As soon as Brown was in office, he made a lot of appointments, appointing some of the people who worked with us, and some of the very close friends of the Movement. For example, he appointed LeRoy Chatfield as his director of administration, and Dr. Jerome Lackner as director of the Health Department.

I think that Governor Brown is very different than most politicians. He knows that changes have to be made. He is looking for the areas where they should be made, and for ways of bringing about meaningful changes, not just cosmetic ones.

But there had been rumors that the governor had said that he was going to introduce "fair" farm labor legislation that no one was going to like. So I was concerned. And since we had about twenty thousand people at the Modesto rally, I warned them about the legislation.

Then I pointed in the direction of Sacramento and said that we liked Governor Brown, but we liked the farm workers more, and that maybe we would have to go to Sacramento.

The reports I got back were that the governor didn't like that statement. But at that point he became very interested in legislation and started working almost full time on it. Shortly after the march, we had a meeting with him and his staff for one whole day and laid out what we thought had to be covered. When we left his Los Angeles home, I had a good feeling that he was going to come up with a bill that was going to be acceptable.

Well, I think what happened was that he let his assistants draft a bill, and they butchered it. When it was introduced, it was a devastating bill. We let him know immediately that we were against it, and we began to fight with him, not only in California, but throughout the country. We didn't know if we could get him to change it.

LEROY CHATFIELD RECALLS

During my years with the farm workers, my feelings were that legislation probably wouldn't solve the problem. I had so little trust in politicians. It was very difficult for them to really understand the issues. And once "good legislation" was introduced, it would get so whittled down that when the final product came out for our governor to sign, it would be so weak that you'd have the weakest people, namely the farm workers, up here in Sacramento demonstrating against signing a bill that was supposedly in their best interest.

Also I'd never worked with Governor Brown before. I had to go through a period of really convincing myself where his mind was, where his heart was in respect to the farm worker thing in general.

Now, the closer I worked with him, the more I realized that he genuinely wanted to see if he could put this thing together—and for the right reasons—and do the right thing. He knew he was going to piss off people on all sides.

So once I knew that he was on rock bottom, then I felt that if a bill came to his desk that was harmful to the farm worker movement in general, he would veto it. He's a very principled person, and he felt very strongly about this.

But at first I remembered how Cesar and Marshall Ganz talked about what legislation did to the Civil Rights Movement in the South. It seemed to take the wind out of its sails. So whenever the governor or any of his staff would ask my opinion, I would explain that I was opposed to legislation, and I would speak out in favor of what I called a negotiated settlement, using the power of the governor's office to try to bring people together and to hammer out a settlement that all sides would agree to.

The counterargument, and the governor made it on more than one occasion, was that that was very tenuous. There had been agreements in the past. They hadn't worked out. He always said that the idea of going the way of negotiated settlement was like grasping water.

So then he set his people to work drafting legislation. A lot of people had input into it. I certainly did. I was locked to, in an ad hoc and informal way, to represent the farm workers' viewpoint. It was very agonizingly difficult for me. Sometimes the staff or the governor would ask questions right off the wall—What about this? What about that?

I was just straining into my consciousness, anything that I could remember from the past. How should I answer this? I couldn't just

pick up the phone and call someone. Sometimes I was very uncomfortable wondering how that would wash, so to speak, with Jerry Cohen, for example, or Cesar, or Dolores, or Marshall Ganz. Am I being unfair to the farm workers? Am I adequately representing their viewpoint? And I wanted to scream sometimes and say, "But look, they should be here! Why should I have to . . ." But that's human nature.

This issue was so important to the governor that he wanted to be in very close contact with those working on it, sometimes it just seemed like hours and hours on end. I mean he literally mastered this question of farm labor legislation. And he personally made known his views to those who were drafting legislation. I was just really amazed at how quickly and vastly he brought himself in tune with what really goes on out there.

Politically, Governor Brown is extremely astute. Later, when he was talking with growers, when he was talking with Teamsters, when he was talking with farm workers, he could sense soft points, weakness, if you will. He could sense strength. Instinctively he began to feel what was giveable, what was not giveable.

GOVERNOR EDMUND G. BROWN, JR., RECALLS

After all the years of struggle, I felt it was time to have a secret-ballot election law and appropriate machinery for handling unfair labor practices. For that reason, I asked Rose Bird, secretary of agriculture, and her staff to start putting a bill together. They invited input from a number of sides, but they wrote it within the agency.

My understanding of the problem is that in order to assure relatively peaceful solution to the disputes, you have to balance economic power, and you need a framework that is predictable so all sides can understand the rules. I felt that if I could write a bill that was in itself a fair and reasonable charter to solve this problem, I could then convince all sides with very few additions or subtractions.

After the bill was introduced, I invited in the bishops and the religious groups that had supported Chavez, to get support for the bill. I convened a meeting in Los Angeles with supermarket executives, who then communicated with the growers. I even called a New Jersey supermarket president in Hawaii, where he was at a convention, to ask his support for the bill. Then I sent out thousands of letters, too, not only to union officials, but to sheriffs,

school board members, city councilmen, county supervisors to enlist the broadest possible support and make the bill that I had introduced the vehicle for compromise

You can't bring political pressure to bear unless political pressure is already there I really think truth has its own inherent power, and when it is combined with the historical moment, with maybe a nudge here and there, things happen

I saw my role as a catalyst I wanted that bill, and I brought all the forces together and constantly mixed them and made them interact in a way that made things possibly more propitious for solution I pushed the bill, and then after it was in, I kept working. I suppose if I hadn't done that the whole issue might have come up later, and then it might not have been possible to solve.

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

The governor began to ask, "What's wrong with this?" And we began to negotiate. Jerry Cohen talked directly with LeRoy who talked directly with the governor Jerry has a brilliant mind He's got a really good way of getting the most complicated legal stuff and either complicating it beyond any hope, if that needs to be done, or just really going to the core and explaining it very simply And he was at his best because it was negotiating over legal language

There were some very hectic meetings, all night meetings On Saturday night, May 3, they negotiated all night and all through Sunday and all through Sunday night By that time it was down to Jerry and the governor and LeRoy and one or two of the governor's assistants We compromised as much as we could Finally we said, "This is the minimum we'll accept, and we won't accept changes"

The compromise would set up a five-man board to run secret-ballot elections It would permit the largest amount of people to vote, requiring that elections be held at peak season employment, so that the migrants could vote. It also was geared so that elections would be held quickly, so that we wouldn't get caught fighting for an election one day, and then waiting two or three months for it, until everybody was gone It would permit workers to vote on the pre-existing Teamster contracts and set up voting on the basis of all the workers on a ranch, instead of by crafts It also dealt with unfair labor practices, guaranteeing that a worker could not be fired because he openly declared himself for one union or

another. And it prevented the employer from continuing a relationship with the Teamsters, prevented the employer from telling the worker that if he didn't vote for the Teamsters, he was going to get fired. It also permitted strikers to vote.

We gave up some of our rights to boycott, but we kept the right to the primary boycott, and—if we won an election—the right to ask people not to shop at a store if it was selling a product from a grower where we had won an election. That meant that if we won an election, and the grower wouldn't sign a contract, we would have the right to bring economic pressure to him.

On May 5, I was conducting an intensive campaign in Los Angeles County on the campuses to develop support for our position. I went to about six or seven different universities, and we had a lot of press. The next day, we were previewing the film, "Fighting for Our Lives," for the farm workers in Bakersfield. It's a documentary on the 1973 strike.

About 7:00 P.M., a call came in from Jerry. I was already on my way to the rally, so I sent word, asking if it could wait until 9:30. The word came back, "Yes, but we're pushing it. It's extremely important."

The moment the film was over, I rushed out to the phone. I had to go through a lot of people who were very enthusiastic after seeing the film. Many had been involved in the beatings and the jailings that they had just seen. So I had a hard time getting to the phone.

When I did, Jerry told me, "The governor is getting together all of agribusiness here in Sacramento, right now, in his office. They've agreed to the proposal. But they have some preconditions."

I said, "Did we do anything wrong, Jerry?"

So I talked to the governor, and he said, "Look, it's going to be at least a half hour to forty-five minutes, because we don't have everybody here yet. We need a little time."

I said, "Okay, we'll call you." We went over to my daughter's house in Bakersfield. A half hour later I called, and they said, "Well, it's going to be at least an hour, forty-five minutes."

So we drove to La Paz. There I called the governor immediately, and he said, "Well, we're still not quite ready. We're putting some loud-speakers on the telephone."

I found out the growers would agree to accept the compromise provided we did two things—that we agreed that nothing should be changed, not even a period, and that they hear from me personally that we were supporting it.

So I told the governor, "Well, Jerry's there. He's our representative. He's authorized."

"They want to hear you personally."

I thought that it was very ironic that we should have the same precondition, that there be no changes. It showed how much trust we had in each other.

So when they got the phone hooked up to the loud-speaker in the governor's office, Governor Brown got the growers, one after another, to identify themselves and state publicly they were for the bill.

Jerry tells me the growers were all sitting at a table. When the governor asked me if I would support the bill, they all moved out to the edges of their seats, looking at the loud-speaker. And when I answered, "Very, very definitely," they broke into smiles and applause.

FROM JACQUES LEVY'S NOTEBOOK

After the committee approves the bill, the governor calls a special session of the legislature to consider it. The move is a technicality which permits the bill to become law within ninety days, after passage. The first elections then can be held in the fall instead of waiting until the 1976 harvests.

While passage of a California Bill of Rights for farm workers would be considered a major landmark, this history of La Causa cannot be ended. It has only begun. Ahead are more human drama, more sacrifice, more victories, and more defeats.

The union's progress will be slow, as each segment of agribusiness attempts to delay the day when its workers are represented by the union of their choice. Legislation setting up secret-ballot elections may ease the question of representation, but an election won doesn't guarantee a contract.

In the future, Cesar Chavez and his followers will repeat the tactics they have used in the past, turning to the public for support to equalize the economic power of those who provide jobs and those who need them.

And the union's opponents will fight back, attempting to discredit La Causa and its leaders, attempting to amend legislation to make it ineffective in providing the majority of agricultural workers the same rights enjoyed by other working people, and attempting to block unionization with the use of local courts and police.

To help counter some of this political power, the union already has plans to organize the poor and the elderly in both rural and urban areas, thus broadening its base and its political effectiveness.

At this juncture the success of La Causa cannot be measured in terms of numbers of contracts, wage increases, and improved working conditions. Significant advances have been made, but the ground to cover is still great.

Of far greater importance has been La Causa's achievements in showing the way to meaningful social change by using militant nonviolent tactics and by organizing people of various backgrounds, political persuasions, and faiths. In an era of great cynicism, La Causa is showing that individuals can make a difference, can help themselves and others, and can keep their principles, although the task is hard and is never-ending.

CHAPTER 14

Saying Yes to Man's Dignity

CESAR CHAVEZ LOOKS AHEAD

Once we have reached our goal and have farm workers protected by contracts, we must continue to keep our members involved. The only way is to continue struggling. It's just like plateaus: We get a Union, then we want to struggle for something else. The moment we sit down and rest on our laurels, we're in trouble.

Once we get contracts and good wages, we know the tendency will be for the majority to lose interest, unless the Union is threatened or a contract is being renegotiated. The tendency will be for just a few to remain active and involved, while everybody else just holds out until something very big happens. That's true of other unions that we've seen, that's true of other institutions, that's true of our country.

To avoid that, to keep people's attention and continuing interest, we've got to expand and get them involved in other things. The Union must touch them daily.

Our best education, the most lasting, has been out on the picket line. But when the initial membership gets old and dies off, the new people coming in won't have had the same experience of building a Union. So we must get them involved in other necessary struggles.

Poor people are going to be poor for a long time to come, even though we have contracts, and economic action is an exciting thing for them. If they see an alternative, they will follow it. And we've probably got now the best organization of any poor people in all the country. That's why we can go any place in California where there are farm workers and get a whole group of people together and in action. We are hitting at the real core problems.

After we've got contracts, we have to build more clinics and co-ops, and we've got to resolve the whole question of mechanization. That can become a great issue, not fighting the machines, but working out a program ahead of time so the workers benefit.

Then there's the whole question of political action, so much political work to be done taking care of all the grievances that

people have, such as the discrimination their kids face in school, and the whole problem of the police. I don't see why we can't exchange those cops who treat us the way they do for good, decent human beings like farm workers. Or why there couldn't be any farm worker judges.

We have to participate in the governing of towns and school boards. We have to make our influence felt everywhere and anywhere. It's a long struggle that we're just beginning, but it can be done because the people want it.

To get it done, there's a lot of construction work needed with our members. Many are not citizens, and others are not registered to vote. We must work toward the day when the majority of them are citizens with a vote.

But political power alone is not enough. Although I've been at it for some twenty years, all the time and the money and effort haven't brought about any significant change whatsoever. Effective political power is never going to come, particularly to minority groups, unless they have economic power. And however poor they are, even the poor people can organize economic power.

Political power by itself, as we've tried to fathom it and to fashion it, is like having a car that doesn't have any motor in it. It's like striking a match that goes out. Economic power is like having a generator to keep that bulb burning all the time. So we have to develop economic power to assure a continuation of political power.

I'm not advocating black capitalism or brown capitalism. At the worst it gets a black to exploit other blacks, or a brown to exploit others. At the best, it only helps the lives of a few. What I'm suggesting is a cooperative movement.

Power can come from credit in a capitalistic society, and credit in a society like ours means people. As soon as you're born, you're worth so much—not in money, but in the privilege to get in debt.

As a continuation of our struggle, I think that we can develop economic power and put it into the hands of the people so they can have more control of their own lives, and then begin to change the system. We want radical change. Nothing short of radical change is going to have any impact on our lives or our problems. We want sufficient power to control our own destinies. This is our struggle. It's a lifetime job. The work for social change and against social injustice is never ended.

That's why if we make democracy work, I'm convinced that's by far the best system. And it will work if people want it to. But to make it work for the poor, we have to work at it full time. And we have to be willing to just give up everything and risk it all.

In the last twenty years, the farm workers' outlook has radically changed, just like day and night. Twenty years ago, to get one person to talk to me about the Union was an effort. They were afraid. Now, we've overcome that.

And the idea of serving without pay—they had never heard about that. Right now we need a good education program, a meaningful education, not just about the Union, but about the whole idea of the Cause, the whole idea of sacrificing for other people.

Fighting for social justice, it seems to me, is one of the profoundest ways in which man can say yes to man's dignity, and that really means sacrifice. There is no way on this earth in which you can say yes to man's dignity and know that you're going to be spared some sacrifice.