

## Farmworker Volunteers

By LeRoy Chatfield ©



Student supporters of the United Farm Workers picket a San Diego Safeway store.  
LEFT PHOTO/CARLOS LeGERRETTE/San Diego Picket Line, 1969 ©, RIGHT PHOTO/CHRIS SANCHEZ/Fresno, United Farm Workers Convention, 1973 ©

The first thing that must be understood about being a volunteer in Cesar Chavez's farmworker movement was that there was no money to be made. All volunteers were paid a subsistence stipend, the famous "\$5-a-week" salary. Of course, it cost the movement much more than the \$5-a-week spending money. There was room and board, approved pre-existing loan payments (typical examples might be a car loan and insurance, student loan payments, a home mortgage, etc.), house utilities, grocery allowance for families, transportation costs, and so forth—but all union-approved and tailored to meet the individual needs of the volunteer and his/her family, if applicable. There was always financial tension between the union and the volunteer. On the union side, it was too much money, and on the volunteer side, it was never enough money.

This financial arrangement alone ensured that most volunteers would not overstay their usefulness. And volunteers without family obligations were much less expensive, because young unattached adults could live in boycott or field office communities, or in the dorm rooms of the La Paz union headquarters, and eat their meals in a communal kitchen. Those volunteers who were assigned to the boycott cities had more access to additional living support than those working in Delano or later at the La Paz headquarters, for the simple reason they could appeal to churches and unions for additional resources.

As the years of the movement wore on, there was a concerted effort made by the farmworker staff to lobby for a modest but more traditional type of salary program, but Cesar would not hear of it. This was yet another example, I believe, of his determination to build a movement, not a union, even if it meant losing good people because of their need for more financial stability and their desire to be less dependent on having to individually plead their case for additional funds.

Many of the original volunteers came from the striking workers themselves. Some were single and others were married with small



children. Their first assignments were such usual strike activities as picketing, union meetings, rallies, and marches. But within a few years, as the boycott operations expanded, many were asked to leave Delano and accept assignments in boycott cities across the United States and Canada. Some of the married strikers left their wives and children at home with members of their extended families when they went out on the boycott, while others took the whole family.

Most of the volunteers from the cities who joined the farmworker movement were young and unattached. Some stayed for a few months, others for several years (65% of the volunteers stayed five years or less; 45% stayed three years or less). The hours and days and months of unrelenting work (and relocations at a minute's notice) were so demanding that a kind of burnout was always close at hand. It was just a matter of time before volunteers moved on to resume more normal lives that would include college and/or graduate school education, marriage, child-rearing, and professional careers. In short, they felt the need to free themselves to plan for their own future. Because of the relatively short time span of their involvement, volunteers rarely overstayed their welcome.

Many married volunteers joined the farmworker movement under the auspices of the National Farm Worker Ministry, and while no special accommodations or distinctions were made in terms of the kinds of union assignments they received or in the work expectations imposed upon them, they were provided with slightly more financial security and with much less dependence upon Cesar's budget constraints.

For those union-supported married volunteers who were assigned to the La Paz headquarters, it didn't take long before the reality of the cult-like atmosphere of Cesar's movement wore down one spouse or the other. It sometimes became necessary to create more personal space by taking an assignment away from La Paz and working for the union from a suitable distance until the need to return to a more normal life became more obvious and necessary. But if that option wasn't available, then married (and nonmarried) volunteers would tough it out for as long as they could, and sometimes that period would be measured in years.

Older volunteers who came later in life frequently came with a specified length already in mind, generally one or two years, and many of them were associated with the National Farm Worker Ministry, which offered some outside organizational support services. Some were priests and



nuns, who at their own request were assigned to the farmworker movement by their diocese or religious orders and were supported by them.

But the individual case of every farmworker volunteer was different, and there were notable exceptions to the general categories of volunteers that I have identified. In fact, some volunteers, both from within the strike itself and from the outside, adapted to the demands of the movement so well and manifested such great motivation that as the success of the farmworker movement grew, they were appointed to positions of responsibility, and some were eventually elected to the union's board of directors. These volunteers seemed destined to make the farmworker movement their life's career, and a few have done just that.

So then, what was the problem?

The problems were no different from any other organizations, except that in Cesar's movement it was a closely held and supercharged occupation. It was a cause, after all. People were called to undertake this all-consuming work and felt privileged to be associated with its leader, a person who was known worldwide for his dedication, leadership, and moral stature. Volunteers, more or less, depending on their status within the farmworker movement, shared in the glow of his celebrity status.

But in the final analysis, Cesar understood the cause of the farmworker movement to be a way of life, which not only included organizing farmworkers into a union, but one that would emulate and support his vision. And while key leadership staff tolerated his demand for total commitment for the sake of unionizing farmworkers, they were much less enamored with his vision. Ultimately, the need for a personal life and individual status clashed with Cesar's priority of building and maintaining a strike force community. But no compromise was forthcoming. Cesar was the founder, it was his vision, and he had the final say. As a result, the stage was set for a few board members and key staff to be summarily forced out and, sad to report, vilified. For the sake of his vision, everyone was expendable.

Today, more than 25 years later, I still sense from some of these long-term, dedicated, and gifted former volunteers, a sense of loss. They talk about the loss of opportunity for farmworkers, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, inflexibility and stubbornness, lack of union democracy, the refusal to incorporate and assimilate nascent farmworker unions, and an unwillingness to compromise. At the same time, after so many years



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of personal service, they find it difficult to express their feelings publicly concerning their forced departure, and it is this stubborn silence that engenders their personal bitterness and their feelings of loss.

It isn't a question of whether Cesar was right or wrong in defending his vision. As long as I knew him, he never pretended it to be otherwise or held out any other promise. He possessed a vision of what the farmworker movement should be, and when he felt it was threatened, he brooked no opposition or interference, whether from family, friends, board members, or supporters. True enough, he expanded his vision over the course of years, but it was always his vision, and everyone knew it.

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For primary source information regarding Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union, and those who built the farmworkers movement, go online to [www.farmworkermovement.us](http://www.farmworkermovement.us).

