

Strike Violence vs. Nonviolence

by LeRoy Chatfield ©



Cesar Chavez flanked by singer Joan Baez and Arizona labor leader Bill Soltero in Delano, CA, 1973.

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From the first day I met Cesar Chavez, in 1963, he advocated nonviolence as the means to build his union, despite the fact that the U.S. labor movement was built through the use of violence by both employers and workers. For one thing, I think Chavez believed it was the right thing to do, but perhaps even more important, he believed it was the only strategic way to protect striking farmworkers from the violence that would certainly be visited upon them by law enforcement personnel and grower-sponsored thugs. He also reasoned that the use of nonviolence would encourage the support of religious people and church bodies for his farmworker movement, and that could be critical to the survival of his fledgling organization.

Still, during my ten-year involvement with the movement, I heard many rumors about the use of violence in the Delano Grape Strike. At the time, based on the rumors I heard and the strikers and volunteers from whom I heard these rumors, I concluded that 33% were wishful thinking, 33% were bravado expressed after a few beers, and 33% were real.

Now, 30 years later, as a result of organizing the Farmworker Movement Documentation Project (www.farmworker.org) wherein I collected 200 essays written by the volunteers and strikers who built the movement, and participated in an exceptionally frank and emotionally charged eight-month online discussion with more than 300 volunteers and strikers, and having communicated privately for three years with hundreds of strikers and volunteers, I can say with utmost confidence



that the percentages should be: 45% wishful thinking, 45% bravado, and 10% real.

The question is, what is the definition of violence in the context of a farmworker movement strike? For example, the purpose of the picket line itself was to intimidate strikebreakers from going to work to break the strike. Is that violence? Certainly, local judges agreed with the growers who came before them and made the picket-line-violence argument and were granted injunctions to prohibit picketing altogether or to limit it to such a degree that it could not be effective.

What about the farmworker-union-sponsored marches, candlelight vigils, and processions in neighborhoods where labor contractors lived and strikebreakers were housed? I expect that the labor contractors or the strikebreakers who were the targets of these neighborhood demonstrations considered them to be intimidating and even violent, and perhaps they feared for their families, their homes, and their automobiles. Is that violence? Local law enforcement considered these confrontations violent and did everything they could to prevent them, including, on occasion, arresting some of the strikers.

And what about the Anglo volunteers posing as process servers who walked into the fields armed with a legal summons to be served upon the crew foreman in the presence of his crew for the purpose of intimidating workers who feared they would also be served with a legal summons and be forced to make a court appearance? Was the use of these trumped-up legal tactics a form of violence?

When the union newspaper, *El Malcriado*, published photographs of strikebreaking labor contractors and wrote unflattering articles about them, which were then distributed throughout valley towns where the workers lived, is that to be considered violence? Certainly, the hope was that these contractors would be so intimidated they would work elsewhere or at the very least be ostracized by their friends and neighbors.

In the very early months of the strike, union members followed strikebreakers home after they left the fields in order to discover their addresses, license plate numbers, and the names of any neighbors friendly to the union who might put pressure on them to work elsewhere. The union hoped that even the act of tailing strikebreakers would provide



enough intimidation so they would stop breaking the strike. Is this violence?

Without doubt, there was some overt personal property damage directed against the vehicles used by strikebreakers, e.g., holes punched into radiators and/or tires slashed. The purpose, of course, was to intimidate these strikebreakers and to send a message throughout the community that automobiles owned by strikebreakers might suffer a similar fate.

On dozens of occasions, union organizers followed the commercial trucks that transported the harvested grapes hundreds of miles to either Los Angeles or San Francisco in an effort to intimidate the drivers and to find out where the grapes were being delivered so that picket lines might be set up at produce terminals. How intimidated did the truckers feel when followed by strangers for such great distances? Is this a form of union violence?

There were reports, especially during the first year of the strike, that hundreds of vines had been cut with a chain saw, dozens of irrigation pumps disabled, and a couple of ancient packing sheds near railroad sidings burned to the ground. These are obvious cases of property damage directed against an employer for the purposes of intimidation, but without minimizing it, they represented run-of-the-mill property violence that might be found in a major labor dispute anywhere.

I believe this to be true: every farmworker striker and volunteer experimented at some point with “violence” or at least considered the possibility of using it if they thought it might force the growers to recognize the union. How could it be otherwise, especially in the United States, where the labor movement has resorted to violence or counter-violence to press its demands? In the case of California agriculture, these struck table grape growers had near-absolute power; they were beholden to no one. They controlled the courts and law enforcement agencies, they imported thousands of strikebreakers hundreds of miles by bus from the Mexican border, and for decades they ran roughshod over the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively.



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L-R, Jimmy Herman (ILWU), singer Joan Baez, Cesar Chavez, and Bill Soltero (Laborer's Union, AZ) march in Delano, CA, 1973.

Photo: Carlos LeGerrette ©

After the first harvest season of the Delano Grape Strike in 1965, it was clear to the union and the striking farmworkers that the grape strike could not be won in the fields. The situation was hopeless.

And yet in the face of this hopelessness, Cesar Chavez advocated that nonviolence was the only way to win the strike and secure union recognition. Was he aware that many strikers – and AFL-CIO establishment union leaders – rejected the strategy of nonviolence as a viable option to win union recognition? Yes, and not only aware of the mounting calls for violence, but he chose to confront it. He undertook a 25-day fast to force his followers to make a decision: do it my way or leave the movement. Was he personally conflicted about the need to use/not use violence to win union recognition?

Of course he was. Had he himself experimented with the use of violence? I believe he had. But in the final analysis, and very early in his movement, he made the personal decision that violence was not a viable route to win union recognition. Did his decision about the use of nonviolence mean that no violence would ever again be perpetrated by his followers? No, of course not. But they would know full well that it violated Chavez's irrevocable commitment to nonviolence.

What were the results of his commitment? Correct me if I am mistaken, but during the 31-year period of his movement, not a single grower or family member was killed or injured, their house burned or automobile vandalized; nor any agribusiness supervisor, nor any local law enforcement officer, nor any farm labor contractor. No farmworker striker or organizer was ever convicted of doing bodily harm to a strikebreaker. Only one farmworker organizer was ever convicted of causing property



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damage. On the other side of the ledger, three farmworkers were slain during strike activity, and one young farmworker volunteer was killed by a company truck driving through a picket line. During this 31-year period, there were hundreds of strikes and thousands of strikebreakers and striking farmworkers –an amazing tribute to the leadership of Cesar Chavez.

On balance, I conclude that Cesar Chavez and his movement were extremely successful in preaching and practicing nonviolence to accomplish their goals; unfortunately, the same cannot be said about agricultural employers.

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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.

