

The Legacy of Cesar Chavez

By LeRoy Chatfield ©



Cesar Chavez speaking to farmworkers at a 1973 United Farm Workers rally.

Photo: Carlos LeGerrette ©

From 1962 to 1993, Cesar Chavez dedicated himself to organizing a farmworkers movement in California. How will history remember him? Some may be content to define him simply as a historic labor leader and founding president of the United Farm Workers union. But his vision for the farm workers movement encompassed far more than organizing a union. And his elevation to the status of a revered icon has less to do with his union activities than with the personal sacrifices, commitment to nonviolence, and deep religious conviction that marked his life of service to impoverished farmworkers.

As one who worked with Cesar Chavez (from 1963 to 1973), I saw firsthand his commitment to establishing a broad range of services for farmworkers. The farmworkers credit union he established, for example, was especially dear to his heart.

Some historical background is needed to fully appreciate Chavez's accomplishments and aspirations.

Chavez's National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) was not organized as a labor union but as a self-help membership association whose members would receive the mutual benefits of belonging to a credit union and a death-benefit insurance program. Additionally, members would be eligible to receive immigration, welfare and income tax assistance and a variety of other kinds of ad-hoc representation with



government agencies and programs. This “do gooder” kind of community organizing was, more or less, a continuation of the kind of work Chavez had done for many years with the Community Services Organization (CSO), an organization designed to assist Mexican–Americans. Now, however, his focus was exclusively on farmworkers.

Even if Chavez’s intent was, in fact, to organize a labor union for farmworkers, he knew there were two obstacles that would be difficult to overcome. First, had he advertised and promoted the NFWA as a labor union, it would have been targeted and undermined by the growers and their allies. He would have been defeated before he could get started. Second, the AFL–CIO already had a campaign in place to organize farmworkers – the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, AFL–CIO (AWOC). If Chavez organized his own labor union, he would butt heads with both friends and foes. He chose the community–organizing model instead, the one with which he was most comfortable and familiar.

In September 1965, AWOC – overwhelmingly comprised of Filipino workers – called a strike during the table grape harvest in Delano to seek union recognition and better piece rates. Within a few days, the NFWA – mostly made up of Mexican–American workers – joined the strike. The strike activities of AWOC, while carried out at the local level, were managed by a union regional director operating out of Stockton and carefully advised (and controlled) by AFL–CIO–paid attorneys from the San Francisco Bay Area. Chavez himself, the president of NFWA, managed NFWA strike activities along with his close knit board of directors and a few key volunteer staff members. Responding to the common threat of the grower community, both AWOC and NFWA coordinated their strike activities, provided mutual support and sought to maintain a shared vision despite their organizational differences.

But Chavez’s vision for the NFWA went far beyond manning union picket lines and winning the strike. He actively promoted farmworker cooperatives, a medical clinic, a legal department, a service center, an intensive educational program for organizers, a newspaper (published in English and Spanish), an international consumer boycott, a theatre group, a self–insured health and welfare plan, volunteerism, a statewide microwave telecommunication system, a filmmaking group, a preschool, a computerization project, a fully–equipped mail house, a graphic arts and print shop, a retirement center for unmarried farm workers, the purchase of Spanish language radio stations, Catholic priest union



chaplains, a community living program for staff and volunteers, motivational seminars and retreats for staff and volunteers, organic gardening, healthy dieting, farmworker political action and, of course, his beloved credit union.

Early in the formation of the NFWA, the California Migrant Ministry had established a strong and supportive presence for Chavez's organization as part of its religious ministry to farmworkers. The Ministry assigned key staff, akin to the concept of worker-priests, to the NFWA and most importantly, provided a direct link back to mainline Protestant churches at the regional, state and national level. The NFWA strike in Delano put migrant ministry staff on the farmworker picket lines to confront growers, labor contractors, strikebreakers and local law enforcement. Their presence on the picket lines was instantly communicated – and felt – by the state and national church community. The direct participation in the strike by these ministers called for an appropriate church response.

Chavez's years of service to the CSO, including his relationship to progressive Catholic priests from the San Francisco Bay Area known as the "Mission Band", provided a tangible network of support for the striking farmworkers. The International Longshoremen Warehouse Union (ILWU), because of its independence from the AFL-CIO and its vaunted sense of militancy, was an immediate source of strike support. The CIO Industrial Union Department, influenced by the United AutoWorkers, also took an interest in the farmworkers cause. The Free Speech Movement (1963-1964) at the University of California at Berkeley had ignited a spirit of activism among students and faculty on behalf of such causes as civil rights, the peace movement and now, farmworkers.

Timing is everything. All of these forces – religious groups, independent labor, college students, minority community activists – coalesced around Chavez and his independent National Farm Workers Association to provide a source of volunteers, staff, strike donations and moral support. They also provided a readymade network in the major cities, not only in California but throughout the country, for strike publicity, speaking opportunities, strike donations and political support. This loosely organized network was the precursor of the international boycott of California grapes mounted by the farmworkers movement a few years later.



CESAR CHAVEZ SERVICE CLUB
Building Youth Leadership through Service



A 1973 Coachella strike line showing striking farmworkers at left and strikebreaking Teamster "goons" at right of photo.

Photo: Carlos LeGerrette ©

A steady stream of volunteers and supporters began making their way to Delano during the fall of 1965 and continued until at least 1980. The challenge for Chavez and the NFWA was how to incorporate this outpouring of human support into a viable organizing effort to build the farmworkers movement. The immediate strike activities of the daily picket lines (often starting in the predawn hours), the administrative office and clerical support, the processing of food and clothing contributions, tracking grape shipments and the importation of strike breakers, and the lengthy Friday night union meetings helped to sift out transient, short term volunteers from those willing to commit for a much longer period.

I was one of those volunteers. Within weeks after the NFWA joined the grape strike, Cesar telephoned me in Los Angeles and asked if I would come and work with him, "to help out with the strike", he said. I had recently relocated from Bakersfield to Los Angeles and was enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Southern California but because I admired his cause and we had become such good friends, I could not refuse him.

When I arrived in Delano a few days later, he asked me if I would go to the Bay Area and raise money for his hoped-for-some-day farmworker



cooperatives. For the next six months I traveled throughout the Bay Area and Los Angeles, giving talks to church, student, faculty and community groups about the strike and about the need for funds to start farmworker cooperatives. From my very first day, Chavez impressed upon me that he envisioned far more for the farmworkers movement than simply becoming a labor union.

In fact, during the course of my tenure with the farmworkers, I came to understand that Chavez, with many exceptions, had little regard for labor leaders. His general feeling was that labor leaders tended to adopt a lifestyle and an attitude more like their business employers, than the workers they represented. He was especially bothered by union invitations to speak at conventions held in posh hotels and resorts and declined nearly all of them. Finally, in the mid- 70's, his need to ramp up support for his struggling union overcame his reluctance to speak at union conventions and over the course of several years, he embarked on a whirlwind tour of more than 50 national and international union conventions, not only in the United States but Canada and Europe as well. Despite the fact that he was enthusiastically received on the convention floor, he would accept no awards or honorariums and he tried in every way possible to arrange his schedule to avoid staying overnight in the hotel. He would never be comfortable hobnobbing with labor leaders. Chavez did everything he could to avoid being referred to as a "labor leader".

Chavez had even less regard for insurance companies – and benefit administrators – selected by the unions to provide health and welfare benefits for their members. He maintained the money spent by the insurance companies diluted health and welfare benefits because of outrageous premium costs and by a misplaced emphasis on catastrophic benefits at the expense of more common and routine benefits, including preventive medical care, needed by workers and their families.

In my view, it was Chavez's vision as founder of the farmworkers movement, his lifestyle, his public fasts and his commitment to nonviolence that most distinguishes him from other, more traditional labor leaders.

The most compelling aspect of Chavez's lifestyle was his decision to live in voluntary poverty. When I first met him in 1963, he did not have a telephone, a dress suit, a TV or washing machine. He rented a two-bedroom house in Delano, much too small for a family of 10, and drove



an old Volvo. (After the Volvo expired during the first few months of the grape strike, Cesar never again owned another automobile). One of the reasons he settled in Delano was because his brother's family and his wife's sister and her family lived there. He knew it would take many years to build his organization and if during this time he couldn't support his family, relatives would help keep them afloat.

His commitment to live in voluntary poverty for the sake of helping farmworkers inspired – and challenged – others to join him. They viewed Chavez as authentic and selfless, not a self-appointed leader out to enrich himself at the expense of others. Because of his own personal example, Chavez was able to demand that all those who worked for him would be paid a subsistence stipend. Generally this meant the prospective staff member's monthly bills, once approved, would be paid by the union directly to the vendor and personal spending money would be limited to the now famous, "\$5 dollars a week". Another financial variation used for some volunteers was that once their monthly bills were approved, the union would pay them a lump sum each month to cover those costs. No one was ever hired and paid to "scale". Because of Chavez's personal example, no one would ever enrich himself at the expense of the farmworkers movement.

Fasting is a personal act of self-denial and discipline. A public fast is a call to action, an appeal to conscience and a deeply held personal belief communicated through a public act of self-denial. To my knowledge, Chavez undertook three such public fasts, the first in 1968 in Delano, renewing the movement's commitment to nonviolence, and a second in 1972 in Phoenix, seeking to guarantee the right of farmworkers to organize a union. (Many years later in 1988, Chavez undertook a public fast on behalf of farmworkers who were often exposed to dangerous pesticides without their knowledge or adequate protection.)



CESAR CHAVEZ SERVICE CLUB
Building Youth Leadership through Service



A solemn Delores Huerta at the Nagi Dafullah funeral march, Delano, 1973.

Photo: Carlos LeGerrette ©

A public fast is dramatic because one person, standing alone, undertakes a life-threatening course of action to achieve a goal that is unlikely to be attained before death by starvation. It is also dramatic because, to be effective, such a fast requires a public response to the purpose of the fast. In the 1968 Fast for Non-Violence, thousands of farmworkers from throughout California and Arizona made their way to Delano to visit Chavez, talk personally with him, give him encouragement and support and pledge their commitment to his goal of nonviolence. (While not preplanned, one of the by-products of this public fast was to bring about the most intensive one-on-one organizing campaign ever devised by this, or any other, union.) In the face of his public fast, board members, staff, volunteers and supporters already deeply involved with the farmworkers movement were forced to reexamine – and resolve – their own personal commitment to the principles of nonviolence. The line had been drawn; a personal oath was now required.

In the 1972 fast to protect the rights of farmworkers to organize a union in Arizona, the purpose of the fast became a call to political action – gather enough valid signatures to recall the governor of the state. This public fast placed the issue squarely before the state (and the nation) and served to mobilize citizens of goodwill first of all to sign the recall petition (or register to vote) and second, to become politically active in order to protect the rights of farmworkers in the state. Again, thousands of farmworkers made their pilgrimage to the church in Phoenix where



Chavez was laid up because they realized he was starving himself for their benefit.

From where did Chavez's vision come? Certainly not from formal education. Chavez had attended 28 elementary schools before dropping out of school. Despite his keen intelligence and understanding of people and human nature, Chavez's vocabulary was limited during the first few years I knew him. (Who could have foreseen that Chavez some day would become the most popular lecturer in the history of the University of California, Santa Barbara?) After the strike broke out in 1965 and volunteer "outsiders" swarmed to Delano, his vocabulary increased dramatically. He also became a voracious reader, especially of the life and teachings of Gandhi. Chavez was the kind of person who learned from exposure to people. He often said, "If you don't know what your next step is or what you should do, just go to the people. They will tell you."

In my judgment, Chavez's intensive work with poor people through his CSO years, gave him an understanding of what it was farm workers needed. He had worked with enough people in their own living rooms to know they wanted dignity, a sense of empowerment, a living wage, decent working conditions, health and welfare benefits, funeral expenses, a car in good working condition and fair prices for goods and services – and of course, they had none of those things. This is the vision and commitment he brought with him when he founded the NFWA.

But Chavez's vision seemed to expand geometrically as he met "outsiders" who were attracted to his vision and his work. As he came to understand and admire – by study and conversation – the ideas of others, he simply incorporated those things into his ever-expanding vision. He was the veritable sponge learner but also had the facility to filter out, sometimes over a period of years, what he wanted to incorporate and what he did not.

Chavez's work with the CSO also gave him an appreciation of, and a tolerance for, human nature. Chavez was always quick to relate to – and organize – a person's talents, skills and abilities while not fretting much about personal weaknesses. He accepted the whole person, the plusses and the minuses. Without doubt, Chavez was a master at dealing one-on-one with people. He was focused, gentle, soft-spoken, patient and supportive. He spoke simply and sincerely with great insight and conviction.



CESAR CHAVEZ SERVICE CLUB
Building Youth Leadership through Service

Vision, total commitment, conviction, voluntary poverty, organizing, public fasts, militant nonviolence, discipline – all essential ingredients of the farmworkers movement needed to build a union – also generated varying degrees of emotional overload for its most involved participants.



The farmworker movement embraced religion as shown in the above shrine that was central in the 1966 Phony DeGiorgiou Election campaign.
Photo: Jon Lewis ©

Every movement has a founder, a self-appointed leader – or more softly stated – a person who feels called to serve others. The founder provides the vision, recruits the disciples, lays out the ground rules, sets a course of action and lurches forward – almost a public act of faith. The founder leads by example, provides ongoing education and encouragement to the followers because the founding stages of organization are difficult and discouraging. Even among those most needing the hoped – for benefits, few are interested or willing to give of themselves because they have their own lives to lead and bills to pay.

Most would-be movements never develop the traction needed to grow and attract a large enough following to survive. Chavez's farmworkers movement developed a small base of hopeful believers who hung on long enough to be ignited by the AFL-CIO organizing committee's 1965 table grape strike in Delano. Chavez could have remained on the sidelines and waited for events of his own choosing, but his instinct proved to be correct – he cast in, took ownership of the strike, co-opted it and transformed it into a cause. The movement was finally engaged and grounded, Chavez had a crisis situation to sell to the public at large.



Chavez was not dictatorial nor did he rush around bellowing out orders. His decision-making flowed from consensus building – meetings and freeform discussion. He was not afraid of failure nor did he want his followers to fear it. As long as each person made his/her good faith effort, there was no one more affirming and supportive than Cesar. However, every founder retains the power of the veto. Consensus or no consensus, no decisions were made or implemented that contradicted the founder's vision.

Participation in the movement was all consuming. One fully involved movement participant, much younger than I, recently wrote, "At one time in my life it was all I knew, cared about and worked on day and night." Personal considerations, such as family, social life or use of any available leisure time, were completely secondary to the demands of the movement. Assignments to another city or state – or even a complete change in the assignment itself – were made at the drop of a hat. No consideration was given to career goals or personal advancement. Union programs that were deemed vital today could be put on hold tomorrow and lay dormant for months. For example, the mobilization required for such events as the Coachella Valley strike, the consumer boycott, Cesar's Fast for Non-Violence or the Proposition 22 Campaign consumed all available resources and required everyone's attention.

There was never any sense that victory was in sight. No one expected the strike to be won and contracts signed. Chavez himself believed that it would take at least 20 years to win contracts. Even in 1970, when the table grape strike was declared over and contracts were signed, barely a day passed before the union segued into another sector of the industry, lettuce in the Salinas Valley, and continued the seemingly perpetual war.

The farmworkers movement, like other human rights movements and religious groups, exhibited many characteristics that are similar to– and I use the word respectfully – a cult. These include a charismatic leader, a common enemy, the total commitment of true believers to its righteous cause, tactical leverage resulting from the creative use of time not money, an emphasis on community living and participation, material and spiritual needs of loyal participants met by the organization and a personal sense of discipline. Inevitably, the total commitment by a band of believers to a cause soon puts their needs as individuals (and/or those of their families) into conflict with the organization. For example, career goals, educational opportunities for their children, filial duties to



one's parents, future financial status and even such matters as divorce, separation or affairs, all serve to create tension and conflict within a movement. It took a constant stream of volunteers, both adults and college students, to fill and then replenish, the ranks of the farmworkers movement. Some stayed for months, some for years, and a few even outlasted Chavez himself

And now in this month, April of 2003, the 10th Anniversary of Chavez's death – and after 30 years of work in organizing a farmworker movement – what is his legacy? Why does the state celebrate a holiday in his honor? Why are there now parks, streets and schools throughout California and the Southwest named after Cesar E. Chavez? Among many possible explanations, I choose but a few.

Chavez was an indigenous self-educated Latino leader, born in Arizona and raised in California. He was a farmworker, a veteran, a community activist, an organizer and the founder of the farmworker movement. He accomplished at great personal sacrifice – including the sacrifices made by his wife and eight children – what no other person had ever done before. In the face of undying opposition by the state's largest industry, agribusiness, he built a farmworker union. And following in the tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., he built this union through the use of militant nonviolence.

Chavez has been held up as a symbol – or an icon, if you will – marking a new era in the history of California and the Southwest, the beginning of the Latino century. This year, more than half of all children born in California will be Latino. The vast majority of California students now attending urban elementary schools are Latino. This ethnic sea change has been born out of nearly a 100 years of poverty, discrimination, human suffering and hard work. Chavez's life work represents this historical change. Timing is everything.



CESAR CHAVEZ SERVICE CLUB
Building Youth Leadership through Service



Fred Ross, Sr., the "Grandfather" of organizing, and Cesar Chavez discuss house meeting training for United Domestic Worker organizers during a break at a South Park home in San Diego.

Photo: Carlos LeGerrette © 1979

For more than a decade, Chavez's farmworker movement provided the grist for churches and synagogues to discuss the application of social justice principles when weighed against the farm worker's union call for an international consumer boycott of California grapes. We have to remember that most of the growers also attended church or the synagogue and were generous in their support. Mainline churches played a significant role in the development of the NFWA long before the grape strike in 1965. And once the picket lines were formed in Delano, they carried Chavez's message to urban congregations throughout the country. But Chavez, in turn, helped make the teachings of the church and the synagogue relevant to its religious members who tipped the scales in favor of the cause of the nation's most impoverished workers. Whether canonized or not, Chavez has been enrolled as a modern-day saint and prophet.

In spite of himself, Chavez became the nation's most respected and revered labor leader in the past half-century. His humble lifestyle, his stubborn independence and his vision of a union's role in the lives of its members made Chavez as much of a scourge to labor leaders who operated in the rarefied atmosphere of the capitols of the state and the nation, as he was a lightning rod of inspiration for those union leaders searching for relevance, renewal and reform.



What is Chavez's legacy for the rest of us? He taught us how to organize, how to take something that does not exist and make it exist. Results guaranteed, but only if we are willing to make the personal sacrifices and the life commitment required to motivate and inspire others to join with us to overcome all obstacles – for as long as it takes.

And what is his legacy for those participants who gave themselves to the cause of the farmworkers? For those who lived and worked in the close-knit community of the movement, it was a life-changing experience. For the sake of "La Causa," they were recruited, used for a time, then let go when they could not or would not give any more. After their years of farmworker movement service were over, they took their newfound maturity, discipline, and organizing experience and went on to create successful lives in the real world.

But even now, years after they withdrew, tensions persist. For many, there are nagging feelings of loss and disappointment and a vague sense of being unappreciated. For others, hurt feelings surround the circumstances of their leaving. And a few express sharp criticism, even anger, about what they now believe could have – or should have – been accomplished: a lost opportunity they say. These emotional shards are best left to future academics to sift through and posit their what, why and what ifs.

Chavez, along with his beloved credit union, has now been buried ten years and waits only to be resurrected by yet another indigenous leader who will rise up, in the spirit of Gandhi, King and Chavez, to free people from injustice and oppression.

Chavez's life advanced the cause of human rights in his lifetime, that is legacy enough.

© LeRoy Chatfield, www.leroychatfield.us.

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.



CESAR CHAVEZ SERVICE CLUB
Building Youth Leadership through Service



Cesar Chavez addressing "lechugeros" (lettuce workers) at the UFW Hall in Salinas, CA.

Photo: Carlos LeGerrette ©

CESAR CHAVEZ SERVICE CLUB • BOX 131156 • SAN DIEGO, CA 92170 • 619 233-1331 PHONE • 619 239-3336 FAX • CHAVEZCLUBS@COX.NET
August 2010

