



### Cesar Chavez, Founder

By LeRoy Chatfield ©



Cesar Chavez in San Ysidro, CA., 1971.

Photo: Carlos LeGerrette ©

Cesar Chavez was the founder of a farmworker labor movement; he was not a trade union labor leader. Understanding the difference between founder and labor leader is important because, in my view, it explains why during Cesar's lifetime his organization remained a movement and never developed into a trade union.

Using Catholic religious history as my reference, founders respond to the call of their vision by preaching the mission to be accomplished, recruiting followers who share their vision, and promulgating (and enforcing) rules of service to realize the vision. Through the founder's personal and charismatic organizing – in the beginning, one-on-one – he/she creates an overriding sense of purpose, a cause. The act of organizing and shepherding followers to give of themselves unstintingly to this cause creates the movement. The life of the founder is synonymous with the movement and serves no other purpose. The movement, in turn, belongs only to the founder, and as a result, no policy is adopted or action taken without the founder's approval.



Founders essentially act autocratically even when they incorporate and utilize different kinds of democratic trappings to develop their organizations; for example, creating an elected board of directors to help manage the organization, or delegating authority and/or responsibility to others for specific tasks, or creating consensus among followers by permitting them to vote on the adoption of certain policies. In the last analysis, a founder's organization is not democratic; it is autocratic and inevitably follows his/her vision, even when the policy direction might seem arbitrary and at times senseless or the result of pettiness. Followers are free to disagree, they are free to argue against such policies, but in the end, if they wish to remain, their only real choice is to accept them and wait it out. Only death or exile finally frees the organization and its appointed leadership from the overpowering influence of a founder's veto power. The Lives of the Saints is replete with examples of founders who have been deposed and exiled by followers because they became too stubborn and unyielding, even extreme, in their views.

As founder of the farmworker movement, Cesar Chavez exhibited all the characteristics associated with being a founder. He had vision, he felt called, he preached his mission, he recruited and organized followers, and he imposed upon them a lifestyle of voluntary poverty, superhuman hours of work, and an unstinting commitment so demanding it would ensure that the cause of the farmworkers would be paramount above all else. I know this because I was one of his followers.

Despite all the democratic trappings – and there were many – which Cesar incorporated into his organization, he reserved for himself the power of the veto. He had the last word, and his followers knew and accepted this. For those who did not, they soon gave way to those who did. In the end, the farmworker movement corresponded to the vision of Cesar Chavez, and only he could judge which policies were faithful to his mission and which were not.

I developed this “Cesar as founder” analysis to provide a context, at least to my satisfaction, for understanding his refusal to permit the



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development of union locals and paid staff. And why, in early 1977, he felt the need to dramatically change course and reinvent his movement after the humiliating defeat of Proposition 14; why he closed the farmworker health clinics; and why he felt the need to shed many of his longtime key followers, many of whom had served him faithfully for many years. I believe Cesar was simply acting in his role as a founder trying to recapture and restore his vision.



Cesar Chavez speaks at 1973 UFW rally at Taj Mahal facility in Indio, CA.

Photo: Carlos LeGerrette ©

After the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, and the hundreds of elections that followed in its wake, Cesar became convinced that his vision was overwhelmed and compromised by these uncontrollable events, and worse yet, some of his key followers were openly questioning his leadership by advocating such changes as replacing the volunteer system with paid employees and creating full-blown farmworker union locals. As harshly as his actions might be viewed by some, he sought to protect the integrity of his vision as he saw it, nothing else. He saw no need to justify his actions, and he made little effort to do so, except to accuse some of his key followers of undermining his movement because of their hidden agendas.

My theory does not seek to explain whether Cesar's interpretation of his vision and the policy decisions he made as a consequence were right or wrong, brilliant or dumb, historically significant or shortsighted. I simply say that acting in his role as founder, he was the sole judge of whether the organization remained true to his

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vision of the mission or not. His entire life was wrapped around the axle of his movement, and no one – only death – could pry him loose from his life's calling and commitment.

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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).



Cesar Chavez had great respect and admiration regarding San Diego's student support for the farmworkers movement. The music group, La Rondalla Amerindia, and the Teatro Mestizo, were Chicano students from San Diego who entertained thousands at many of the UFW's rallies throughout the southwest.

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