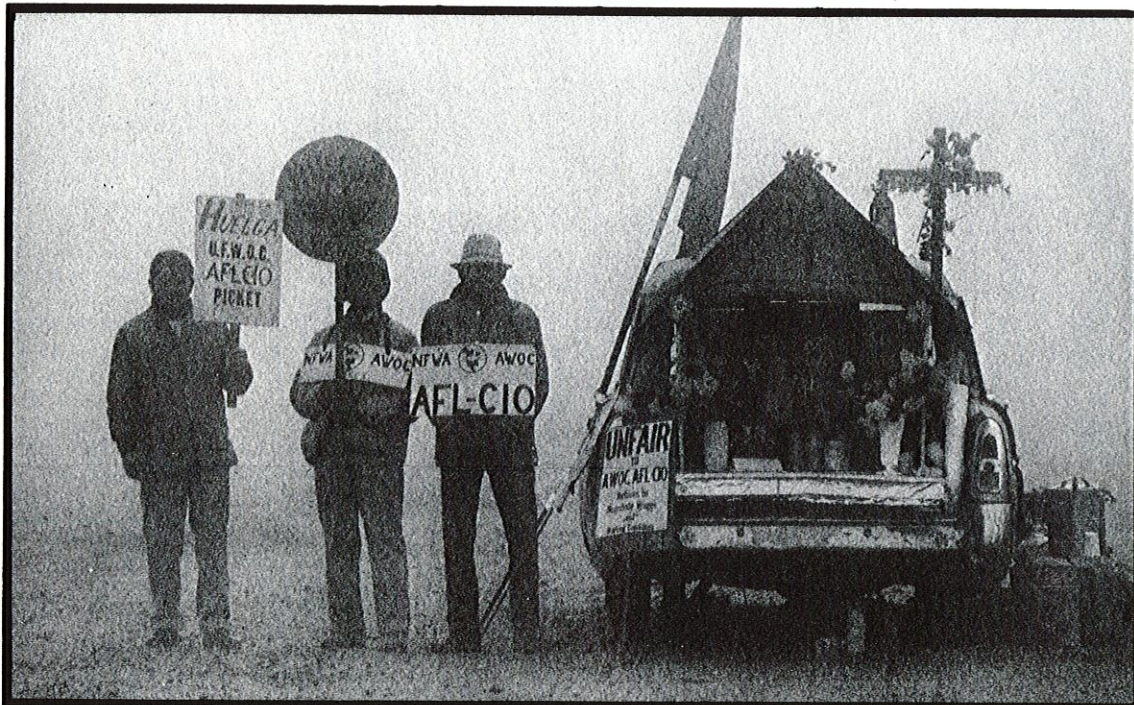


NONVIOLENCE STILL WORKS

**Cesar Chavez:
A controversial labor leader
talks about
a new kind of unionism**

NONVIOLENCE STILL WORKS



Pickets display Chavez's old car, converted into a shrine, during the strike in Delano, Calif.

AT A TIME when many American radicals are saying that nonviolence—as an instrument for social change—died with Martin Luther King, it is reassuring to meet a man of faith who preaches compassion rather than bloody confrontation, practices what he preaches and gets results.

At 42, Cesar Chavez, the head of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, is soft-spoken but tough. This man has had to be. The self-educated son of a migrant family, he has worked hard at stoop labor since the age of ten.

For the past seven years, he has been the leader and guiding spirit of *La Causa*, a movement that is not just a union but also a civil rights group and self-help association run by and for the poor, and dedicated to militant nonviolence.

Today, Chavez's movement is nearing the end of a four-year struggle for union recognition from California's \$140 million-plus grape-growing industry. Contracts have been signed

La Causa has succeeded where many other union movements over many years have tried and failed.

Here are the highlights of a recent conversation with Look in which Chavez tells why:

NONVIOLENCE can only be used by those whose cause is strong. It is very hard, and man's self-control is very weak. I am not completely nonviolent yet, and I know it. That is why I fasted; I felt it was a very personal form of self-testing and of prayer. Anyone could be nonviolent in a monastery, after all, but that is easy, and that was not the way of Christ. What's difficult is to be nonviolent in the cause, in the battle for social justice; knowing what violence can be done to ourselves, knowing—and this is even more difficult—what violence can be done to our family and brothers and our cause.

This requires training. Soldiers must be trained in techniques of war, and

basic discipline is learned, there is never a time you can say you've arrived. The training must be kept up every day.

We must respect all human life, in the cities and in the fields and in Vietnam. Nonviolence is the only weapon that is compassionate and recognizes each man's value. We want to preserve that value in our enemies—or in our adversaries, as President Kennedy said more gently, more rightly. We want to protect the victim from being the victim. We want to protect the executioner from being the executioner.

Sometimes, very well-meaning friends are deaf to our union movement because they believe that grape-picking machines will soon make us obsolete. But that is a false issue for the moment—the machines have to be perfected and bought, the vineyards retrained . . . and even then, mechanization will only work for picking raisins and wine grapes. For table grapes, each bunch has to be inspected. Some-

through five or six times; a machine can't do that.

We are not against mechanization where it's possible. We are not against progress. But the workers must have some say-so on their lives, some bargaining power—not like the cotton industry, which displaced thousands of workers with no training, no alternative, no place to go.

We're for organizing.

We have adapted ourselves, as human beings will, to working conditions that few other Americans would accept. We work in open-air factories where temperatures rise to 115 degrees. Heat prostration is the second cause of sickness with us, because we work long hours with no salt pills and often no fresh water. In winter, when we prune and tie the vines, the temperatures drop to freezing.

Our first cause of sickness is pesticides. There are many questions about what small amounts left on the skins of grapes may do, but there is no doubt about the bad effects for us who work with it in large quantities, who spray it and breathe in the spray and get it on our skins. Some pesticides share chemical effects with nerve gas.

We have had to accept the big humiliations of labor camps and being looked down upon as "dumb Mexicans." We have had to accept the little humiliations of no toilets, no mobile sanitary units in the fields.

WE HAVE accepted child labor, because otherwise our families couldn't live. We have accepted poverty and handouts or hunger during the off-season, because we don't know what unemployment insurance is. We have accepted all these things because we were powerless to defend ourselves.

The deathrate of migrants' babies is 125 percent higher than the rest of the country. So is the deathrate among mothers. We are three times more likely to be injured at work.

We are twice as likely to get flu or pneumonia; TB is even more frequent.

The average American lives to be 70. The average migrant dies at 49.

Our people may not speak in terms like "human dignity," but they know what it means. Instead, they say, "We just want to take care of ourselves," or "We want some say."

There's a great potential. The poor, you know, have a way of solving problems. . . . They have a tremendous capacity for suffering. And so when you build a vehicle to get something done, as we've done here in the strike and

the suffering becomes less important because they see a chance of progress; sometimes progress itself.

They've been suffering all their lives. It's a question of suffering with some kind of hope now. That's better than suffering with no hope at all.

People say that Mexicans and farm workers don't care about anything. People say we don't vote. It's true that many of us fear and distrust Anglos; our experience has been bad.

But Robert Kennedy came to Delano when no one else came. Whenever we needed him, whenever we asked him to come, we knew he would be there. He approached us with love; as people, not as subjects for study—as Anglos usually had done—as equals, not as objects of curiosity. He helped the oppressed. His were *hechos de amor*. Deeds of love.

And our people responded with love. The week before he declared for the Presidency, he was in Delano. The workers there begged him to do it. In the primary, one woman who can neither read nor write was so proud because she turned out her district 100 percent for Kennedy.

And now, Kennedy is dead, and the Farm Workers are still very sad. But we have not forgotten. And we hope the politicians have not forgotten. They must know now that we will vote, but only for someone who understands.

This Christmas was sad for many of our workers who were a long way from their families, without money to come home. They were in many big cities—New York, Boston, Detroit—working on the boycott. You see, the wine companies have recognized our union, but the table-grape growers still have not. They will not sit down to talk with us, and they use strikebreakers illegally, because the Immigration Service and the Department of Justice and the Border Patrol all conveniently look the other way. In our negotiations with the big corporate farms, we find we have to strike just to get an election. This may sound ridiculous to anyone who knows anything about labor relations, but it is a fact.

So the only other nonviolent and economically just instrument we have is a consumer boycott. We do not want to damage the grape industry by this boycott—that would only be taking jobs away from ourselves—but we feel we must tell the consumer that those who sell scab grapes are supporting poverty, supporting injustice.

To do this, small groups of three or four of us go into the cities, living on \$5-a-week strike benefits and staying with union or church groups. Then we

why. It has been successful because many leaders of both parties have supported us—Senator McCarthy, Humphrey, Ted Kennedy, Senator Javits and many mayors of big cities—but it takes a very long time.

Some stores lie to the customers and say the grapes aren't from California. Some big chains just don't want to understand.

So there are still many lonely Farm Workers far from home, picketing in the cold, telling their story to passers-by who will listen. The love of justice in the hearts of other Americans is still our last and best hope.

Who am I? My family became migrants during the Depression, when my father lost his land in Arizona. I went to school whenever I could—30 different ones, because we moved so much—but I never got past the seventh grade; there was work to do. It was only after I had married my wife Helen and I was working to take care of my own children that I realized I couldn't do much unless I had more than my minimal ability to read and write. I taught myself, and it unlocked a new world for me.

In 1952, I was working on an apricot farm in San Jose when a priest told me about a Community Service Organization that was being organized among Mexican-Americans. I met Fred Ross, the organizer of this cso, who was working for Saul Alinsky. I could see right away that this man was not like other Anglos. He drove an old car, and when he discussed our troubles, he did not lie or minimize. He told the truth, and we all recognized it as the truth.

I became active, though I was very awkward and nervous about speaking to groups. We worked on voter registration and citizenship programs—to get our people to vote and understand their rights, to get the power to deal with our problems. After I had worked as a volunteer, I was asked to become a part-time organizer. I knew nothing about it. I was very frightened. But I had a lot of help and training from Fred Ross; so I started to organize community groups. I watched and I learned, and I worked at organizing for ten years, but finally, I resigned. The cso meant well, but it didn't have the heart and courage that were necessary if something was going to be done for the farm workers.

Then we moved back to Delano, Helen's hometown, and I started what I thought would be a five-year preparation before we'd be ready for a strike. In 1965, an AFL-CIO group started asking for a 15-cent-an-hour increase. We had been organizing.



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and a death-benefit program because people didn't even have money for a decent burial. Then we had a Service Center where we did everything from helping workers file claims against employers who owed them money to getting tires for their old jalopies—life or death, because they had no other way out to the fields—at a reasonable price.

WELL, WE TOOK a vote on whether to go out on strike or not, even though we might not be ready. We were unanimous on two things—we would strike, and we would keep the strike nonviolent.

We have won many victories during this long struggle; the fourth year of the strike began in September. In 1966, we marched 300 miles to Sacramento, the state capital, to put our problems before Governor Brown. All through the little towns in the heart of the Central Valley, we marched—singing union songs and workers' songs and songs of joy.

Each night, we held a rally for farm workers nearby, and each morning, there was a joyful Mass. We began with 75 workers, and we carried the Virgin of Guadalupe, the union flag, and the flags of Mexico and the United States. Our theme was “Penitence, Pilgrimage, and Revolution.”

When we got to Sacramento on Easter Sunday, the farm workers and the city friends who had joined us along the way had increased our march to 8,000. The night before we arrived, one big company agreed to negotiate with us, and all the tired workers sang for joy.

It is times like those when we know there is hope to end our suffering.

We are not fighting farmers, but the banks and railroad companies and big corporations that run agri-business, a \$4 billion industry in California.

The responsible men, they are not “poor growers,” as their defenders say. The Giumarra Corporation, for instance, is a family corporation, with 12,000 acres spread over two counties. They are the world's largest producers of table-grade grape; they own oil wells and many stocks, yet they still benefit from a federally subsidized irrigation system that was meant to help small farmers. Their corporate income last year was \$14 million, yet the Federal subsidy program added more than a quarter of a million dollars to that income. John Giumarra, Jr., the spokesman for his family, warns consumers that the union will force prices



One of the members of Chavez's movement picks wine grapes on a ranch in California.

only two to five cents out of each dollar they spend; that even doubling our current pay would up the price by only a penny or so a pound. The growers just don't want to sit down with the union. To each other, they say they just won't give in to dumb Mexicans.

Well, we won't give up either. We'll win in Delano, and then we'll organize other farm workers in other states. We're fighting the strike of the century for our people.

There's no turning back.

Our workers are worried about President Nixon. We supported Humphrey because he supported our cause and our boycott. We were against Nixon because he called our boycott “illegal” and said we should appeal to the National Labor Relations Board . . . when so much of our suffering comes from *not* having the *right* to appeal to the NLRB! According to a report read into the *Congressional Record*, Sen. Edward Brooke had warned that this was false, but Nixon made the statement anyway.

So we are fearful of President Nix-

on. He will have a change of heart. But even if he does not, we will continue.

It may be a long time before we get justice under the law, because the law is on the side of the growers. As Robert Kennedy said to the Delano sheriff during Senate hearings on migrant labor—he was amazed to find that our people were arrested because they *might* commit a crime—“I suggest that the sheriff read the Constitution of the United States.”

It may be a long time before the growers see us as human beings.

It may be a long time before there is no threat of violence to our workers on the picket line, no intimidation by the growers, no allowing strikebreakers to cross the border.

But we will win, we *are* winning, because ours is a revolution of mind and heart, not only of economics.

We have helped people to lose the fear that has been instilled in them.

When a man or woman, young or old, takes a place on the picket line for even a day or two, he will never be the same again. He has confirmed his own