

A PAGE FROM THE LIFE OF CESAR CHAVEZ

It would be hard to find either a poor farm worker, or a rich grower in the state of California who has not at least heard about Cesar Estrada Chavez. He is known and admired by all the poor farm workers from the Mexican border to Oregon, and beyond. Among the rich ranchers of the state, his name causes nervousness, or fear, or grudging respect. And in places as far away as Texas and Wisconsin, poor farm workers see in him a leader who will at last free them from slavery.

Cesar Chavez, then, is well known. But, as often happens, there are many parts of his life, interesting and important in the history of the union movement, which are not widely known. One can find some of his life story in the book on the grape strike, Huelga, by Gene Nelson, from which we quote:

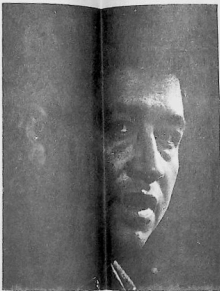
Cesar Estrada Chavez was born in Yuma, Arizona, thirty-eight years ago, into a family of five children which barely eke out a living on their father's small farm near the banks of the Colorado River. When he was ten years old his hard-working father finally went broke, and there was no alternative but to take to the road, doing the only thing they knew how to do--farm work. They became migrants, and entered the stream of workers that followed the crops from Arizona to northern California and back, barely scraping by as they endured the scorching heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter in ramshackle huts or their broken-down car. School was, to say the least, irregular and haphazard. When the perpetually impoverished family finally settled in Brawley, and managed to establish that as sort of a home base for a few years, young Cesar was to suffer the humiliation of segregated schools with second-class equipment. In spite of these humiliations, he liked school, was an alert and receptive student, but the necessity of helping support his struggling family forced him to drop out during the eighth grade to work as a migrant.

But the learning process for Cesar Chavez did not stop there. He continued to read avidly when he was not working, and most of all he kept his eyes open and learned many social lessons that are not taught in public schools.

Cesar tells many incidents from his life, such as:

One winter we were stranded in Oxnard and had to spend the winter in a tent. We were the only people there living in a tent and everyone ridiculed us. We went to bed at dusk because there was no light. My mother and father got up at 5:30 in the morning to go pick peas. It cost 70¢ to go to the fields and back, and some days they did not even make enough for their transportation. To help out, my brother and I started looking along the highway for empty cigarette packages, for the tinfoil. Every day we would look for cigarette packages, and we made a huge ball of tinfoil that weighed eighteen pounds. Then we sold it to a Mexican junk dealer for enough money to buy a pair of tennis shoes and two sweatshirts.

"Well, we finally learned the ropes. We learned where the crops were and when they needed workers, and we learned little tricks like living under bridges and things like that. Once we'd learned the ropes, we began helping other green families like we had been, so they wouldn't have it as rough as we did.



One can see why farm workers believe in Cesar and know him as one of them, experiencing their problems, and having suffered as they have.

For Cesar, the words "strike", "union", and "picket line", and the struggle for social justice were part of his life since childhood. His father was an enthusiastic supporter of the unions, and as soon as one of them came to the region in which he lived, he was the first to become a member. Cesar used to be at home when the men got together and had meetings there at night. He saw the emblems and buttons of the unions on the jackets and shirts of his fathers friends, worn as if they were the decorations awarded to the brave ones after fighting against the bosses. He was very much impressed, listening to the conversations about the strikes, which the workers always seemed to lose, over and over again. At last, when he was 19, he joined his first union. But like all the others, this too soon was defeated.

Later in 1950, Cesar met Father Donald McDonnell and Fred Ross, who taught him the theory of fighting for social justice.

Another person who played an important part in his life is Helen Fabela Chavez, his wife, and a woman with as strong a character and personality as his. She is the daughter of a colonel who rode with Pancho Villa, and she was brought up in the same tradition of rebellion against injustice. The moral support that she always gives to her husband can be illustrated by the following:

In 1961, Shriver of the Peace Corps, who was familiar with the work of Cesar in organizing C.S.O., offered him a job in the Peace Corps, with a salary of \$21,000. In those days Cesar had resigned his post as General Director of CSO because the CSO was not doing enough to help farm workers. Cesar knew that there was no one else to fight for the farm workers. So he turned down the Peace Corps job and the \$21,000, and instead, together with his wife, returned to Delano. They supported themselves picking grapes at \$1.25 an hour, and started to build the National Farm Workers Association. His decision was completely supported by Helen.

These are some of the brush strokes that make up the portrait of Cesar Chavez.