

Can Cesar Chavez Cope with Success?

by Joel Solkoff

Cesar Chavez, whose beatific smile, hunger strikes, and friendship with Bobby Kennedy made him a culture hero of the late '60s, is again flexing his political muscles in California—a state in which Mexican-Americans are the largest minority and where the governor sought and got his endorsement in the last election. But the most recent events in Chavez' dispute with the Teamsters have taken on a comic quality. In February, Chavez announced a boycott of raisins, walnuts and the products of "the Fresno eight"—a group of ranchers his press secretary was unable to readily identify. And Chavez announced that the *Norwegian* parliament had voted to support the boycott aimed at forcing the California legislature to appropriate more money for the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB). And despite everything, it no longer looks as if Chavez is going to lose his battle with the Teamsters.

Before he helped elect Jerry Brown, it seemed as if Chavez might become a union leader without dues-paying members in California. At the height of his power in 1972, Chavez had 60,000 workers under formal contracts. By late 1974, one estimate put membership at fewer than 5000, and his 11 remaining contracts were in danger of being wrested from him.

Brown, who boasted of marching with Chavez in demonstrations, made farm labor peace one of the main goals of his administration. Last summer, after a series of round-the-clock sessions with the Teamsters, Chavez' United Farm Workers of America, and the state's major farm groups, Brown signed the compromise Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA). In February, the ALRB issued a tally of all the elections held under its authority, of which the United Farm Workers (UFW) won 54 percent. The UFW was the clear choice of workers on 193 ranches, and the Board certified the UFW as the sole bargaining agent for more than 80 of them.

The results mean that Chavez has solved his immediate problem. Because the law's penalties are so severe, the Teamsters cannot steal his contracts on those ranches that have been certified, and he has been able to renew his contracts. His farmworker supporters now can prove that the UFW represents them and is capable of commanding jobs. California's fruit and

vegetable growers now know that no matter how distasteful it is to them, Chavez and his movement are—once again—a powerful economic force.

Chavez' organization has undergone several name changes since 1962 when he formed the National Farm Workers Association to compete both with the Teamsters union and AFL-CIO President George Meany's attempt to organize farmworkers. (Later, Meany gave up the effort and allowed Chavez' union to become an AFL-CIO affiliate.) Whatever its official name, Chavez and his supporters have always called the organization *La Causa* (The Movement). Chavez' 25-day fast in 1968 is generally thought to have united California's farmworkers behind Chavez leadership and established him as a hero, a man indistinguishable from his cause. Chavez said he fasted because tempers were frayed after the three-year-old grape strike and boycott were having little success. He said that he was afraid of the violence in his movement and announced that he had stopped eating as a way of forcing his followers to change their behavior. Most of California's farmworkers have strong ties to the Roman Catholic Church, and so his decision to end the fast during an open-air mass, at which a makeshift altar was placed on a flatbed truck, added drama to the event. Robert Kennedy, who was in the process of becoming a presidential candidate, flew into Delano for the publicized event. "I remember the TV people were there," Chavez told his biographer Jacques Levy, "and one cameraman couldn't get in while Kennedy was giving me a piece of bread. When he finally did, he told Kennedy, 'This is probably the most ridiculous request I have ever made. Could you give him a piece of bread again?'"

Two years later, Chavez succeeded in doing what had never been done before. In the same year in which the US Government Printing Office published in 16 thick volumes the Senate migratory labor subcommittee's hearings on "farmworker powerlessness," Chavez proved that field workers could force an entire industry—85 percent of the table grape growers in California—to sign a contract with their union leaders. A significant number of the state's strawberry and lettuce workers also got growers to sign contracts. Such victories were possible because in three principal ways California's agriculture is conducive to union organization:

First, its agriculture, which is the largest and richest

Joel Solkoff's book, *You Reap What You Sow*, an examination of the government's regulation of agriculture, will be published later this year by New Republic Books.

in the country, is year-round. The land in the valleys is so fertile that virtually anything can be grown commercially. In one county alone, there are some 200 crops in production—everything from wheat to oranges. The weather is mild and much of the land yields two, sometimes three, crops a year. So, much of the work is year-round.

Second, employment has been steadily increasing despite the development of labor-saving machines, like harvesters with electronic scanners that tell when tomatoes are red. Not only are hired workers replacing family members who are leaving the farm, but land is being “created.” Much of the rich farm land would not be productive without irrigation. In 1972, California had eight million irrigated acres, twice as many as in 1939. By 1986, there will likely be 10 million irrigated acres. More land requires more workers. In 1974, the state’s annual average farm employment was 287,200, an increase of 5100 over 1973 and of 7500 over 1972.

Third, much of the agriculture is corporate in nature. In California hired workers dominate the farm labor force, while in the rest of the country family farm members are predominant. More than 15 percent of California’s farms have payrolls larger than \$20,000 a year. (In Iowa, the second richest state, the figure is a mere .3 percent.) United Brands, a Boston-based conglomerate, owns the largest lettuce farm in the country—InterHarvest—and farms produce on a total of 22,000 acres in California and Arizona. Tenneco, a company with interests in everything from natural gas pipelines to automotive components, farms 1.4 million acres in California and Arizona. Even those that can, strictly speaking, be called family farms extend for thousands of acres. One third of all the wine consumed in the United States is produced by Ernest and Julio Gallo, who own 3500 acres of vineyards. Some farmers are members of large agricultural cooperatives that control the marketing (and price) of much of our fruit and vegetables. Most of our fresh oranges, for example, come from California and Arizona, and 70 percent of those citrus growers are members of Sunkist, which is a marketing cooperative.

Chavez’ most famous weapon, the boycott, had been successful because California agriculture is large enough to be a good target. The boycott allowed urban supporters—college students, church groups, labor unions and other liberal sympathizers—to participate in the movement by disrupting the orderly marketing of produce. Victory meant that Chavez had to change his role. He was no longer an outsider, using the familiar arguments against agribusiness and building public outrage against the plight of agricultural workers. By 1972, he had signed contracts with such corporate giants as Tenneco, United Brands, Purex, Heublein, and Coca-Cola, and whatever difficulties the workers experienced became his responsibility. In planning a boycott against United Brands’ Chiquita bananas to force InterHarvest to sign a contract with

his union, Chavez expressed the realization that if he won, he would be an insider, and being an insider has different rules.

The boycott was successful because Chavez was able to deliver the workers. He has already proven his ability to damage. As a union leader, holding onto victory required that he work with the growers to their mutual advantage. For the growers, a union, especially one that offers its members—as *La Causa* does—an ethnic bond, can benefit the growers too. Because California’s agriculture is year-round, because the need for workers is increasing, and because the large corporate farms are dependent upon hired workers, cheap labor with a high turnover rate can in the long run be more expensive than responsible, better-paid workers. A union can offer an efficient and stable work force because union members feel that they are part of an organization concerned with their interests. The union bargains with the employer for higher wages, handles grievances, administers benefits, and protects job security. In return, the members are obliged to go to the union if they have a problem—rather than just quit.

However, Chavez made little effort to work the with the growers. Instead, his actions were geared toward his urban supporters. He saw the opportunity to portray *La Causa* as the alternative to the *Grapes of Wrath/Harvest of Shame* tradition of misery. It is, indeed, still possible to find migrants living under the control of an unscrupulous crew leader who contracts with a grower for the harvesting of a field, rounds up workers, delivers them to the field, and who, when the grower pays for the completed work, then cheats the workers. Chavez announced that his union would replace the crew leader system with union-run hiring halls. However, most of the UFW’s dues-paying members live in the community in which they work, and many drive their own cars to the fields. The formal system Chavez established was not only unnecessary, but burdensome. Workers were required to report to the hiring hall every morning rather than go directly to work. Since Chavez made no effort to replace his volunteer staff (whose primary strength had been to fight with growers) with a professional one, the hiring hall created an administrative nightmare. Growers with union contracts had to wait as long as two days for workers who were waiting in the hiring hall wanting to work. Chavez said the workers ran his union and they would sort things out.

Chavez had forced the growers to realize that unionization was not something they could prevent. When they signed contracts with him, they feared that his union would interfere with their business. “Nothing short of radical change is going to have any impact on our lives and our problems,” Chavez said recently. His talk of changing “the system” and “radical change” makes growers uneasy; it doesn’t put their fears to rest, it reinforces them. It did not take long for

the growers to decide that if there had to be a union, it might as well be one they could live with. Produce drivers in California have been working under Teamster contracts for years, and the Teamsters had tried to organize field workers, but with little success. Chavez had proven that victory was possible and when the Teamsters saw that he was unable to handle success, they seized their chance.

There is no doubt that when the Teamsters took over Chavez' contracts, they engaged in collusive relationships with growers in order to destroy the UFW and that the original contracts were "sweetheart" deals imposed by a racist union hierarchy that believed Mexican workers are incapable of making their own decisions. (There is even the suggestion that the Nixon administration pressured Teamsters President Frank Fitzsimmons to break his peace agreement with AFL-CIO President George Meany.) However, having stolen Chavez contracts, the Teamsters decided to change tactics.

They removed the goons from the fields. They hired dedicated Chicano organizers, paying them \$200 a week. Today, Teamster leaders consult directly with the workers and the Teamsters have a better health insurance plan than the UFW, settle grievances more efficiently, and negotiate better contracts. They feel no need to replace the crew leader system and are attempting to build a strong farmworker union, not because they have any sentimental attachment to farmworkers, but because the Teamsters see the potential for expanding their power. They already control trucks, warehouses, terminal stations, even supermarkets. They want to control the fields. Roy Mendoza, the Teamsters' assistant director for organizing farm labor, says, "The difference between our union and the UFW is that we're a labor union. We care about wages and Chavez wants to change the whole system."

In March, when I interviewed Chavez at his union headquarters, I asked him about the Teamster charges that what he runs is a social movement, not a union concerned with bread-and-butter issues. He laughed and said, "I guess what we have is a bread-and-butter social movement." Then, rather than describe how well the UFW deals with such issues and detail the differences between contracts, Chavez explained the importance of a social movement. "We're going through the same problems that the Italians and the Jews and that other groups from foreign countries went through 100 years, maybe 50 years ago. I don't think that it is only an economic problem. They are the problems that any immigrant group goes through in the beginning, problems with language and with acceptance."

Chavez lives at the UFW headquarters in a small wood-frame house guarded by an attack dog named Red and surrounded by a high chain-link fence. The headquarters is a 300-acre complex in the Tehachapi

mountains, which Chavez has christened La Paz (The Peaceful Place). "We are the only union that I know of that owns a mountain," Marc Grossman, Chavez' press secretary, said of the former tuberculosis sanatorium bought for the union by a Hollywood movie producer. Less than 35 miles from the San Joaquin Valley, the richest agricultural valley in the world, the entrance to La Paz warns, "PRIVATE PROPERTY, ENTRY BY PERMISSION ONLY," and a 24-hour security gate and roving patrols protect the fortress-like headquarters from intrusion. La Paz houses data processing machines, industrial art facilities, printing presses capable of producing books, protest button-making machines, training centers, law offices, the union's own insurance company (The Robert F. Kennedy Health and Welfare Fund), a trailer park, a fleet of buses, kennels for breeding and training Chavez' German shepherd guard dogs, bee hives, and the union's own telephone system. It has a resident population of about 150.

Chavez surrounds himself with volunteers who are paid a token \$5 a week. Staff members do not know the answers to such basic questions as: How many dues-paying members does the union have? What is currently being boycotted? Why do Teamster contracts provide for unemployment insurance while those of the UFW do not? Instead, they respond with indignation, as if the reporter is betraying his lack of faith in the asking, and digress with descriptions of Chavez' vegetarianism, feats of self-abnegation, and yoga exercises.

Since Chavez is often unable to do everything at once, he neglects significant problems—like those that arose with the hiring halls—in order to issue a stream of memoranda (on letterhead reading "OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT"), take care of petty details, and undercut the authority of the more competent members of his administration. In his book *Chavez and the Farm Workers*, Ron Taylor describes Chavez "helping out the accounting department" by adding up checks that had been incorrectly counted. Taylor notes, "Chavez has been trying to delegate more and more authority, but in this effort he is clearly a man at odds with himself."

In 1973, Jack Quiggly, Chavez' business manager, quit. Quiggly had argued, "If you spend some money on adult staff who have some experience and you have administrators to run the offices and the field offices, you pay them modest salaries, it would pay off in better relations with the growers, better administration of the contracts. . . . It's not a big deal. Remove the hassle. Then the Teamsters can't come in and take over because the United Farm Workers is known for the radical kids that it puts into jobs that pay \$5 a week."

Larry Iltliong, the Filipino leader whose workers precipitated the 1965 grape strike, resigned from the UFW because of the needless bureaucratic procedures. "We in the top echelon of the organization," he said, "make too many of the rules and we change the rules so

very quickly that the workers themselves don't understand what the hell is going on."

What this February's farmworker election results did not prove was Chavez' contention that the Teamsters are a company union, incapable of getting rank-and-file support in secret-ballot elections. The Agricultural Labor Relations Board reported that the Teamsters were the clear choice of workers on 120 ranches. In March, *Mother Jones*, a San Francisco publication, observed, "To many people who had worked for the UFW and supported its boycotts during its battle to be recognized, and later against the Teamsters, the fact that the UFW hasn't won virtually all of the elections has been surprising."

The Teamster election victories mean that both unions will be representing farmworkers in California and that there will be no quick and easy resolution to the jurisdictional dispute that has helped make the state's agricultural workers the best paid in the country. One of the reasons for the Teamster victories is Chavez' inability to run a labor union efficiently on a day-to-day basis. Rather than deal with the Teamster threat by working on his administrative problems, with which he feels uncomfortable, he decided to attack. His wife Helen once remarked, "We're so used to fights that if we weren't in one, we wouldn't know what to do." Agricultural workers represent less than two percent of the state's total employment, and Chavez has garnered considerable sympathy in urban areas, where there is little understanding of farm problems and where the effectiveness of Chavez' union is taken on faith. On October 10, 1975, Louis Harris published a national poll showing that in the dispute between the UFW and the Teamsters, "[T]he public sympathizes with Chavez by a six-to-one margin." (Particularly interesting was support among "professional people and college-educated" who supported him against the Teamsters by almost 10 to one, while they supported him against the growers by only two-to-one.)

In September, less than a month after the Agricultural Labor Relations Act took effect, Chavez sent a long telegram to Governor Brown, complaining about the Board's administration, "[Y]our law has become one more vehicle with which growers and Teamsters can oppress farm workers." Actually, Chavez had little cause for complaint. The language of the act seems tailored to his needs. For example, Chavez was not required to give up his boycott against growers selling Teamster-picked grapes and lettuce, even though the purpose of the law is to prevent growers from dictating to their workers what union to have. Also, the Governor appointed a Board stacked heavily in Chavez' favor.

In October the UFW issued a 63-page "white paper" arguing that "the law is being subverted and sabotaged, and its promise is being turned to ashes." In November,

Chavez wrote an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, titled "Why the Farm Labor Act Isn't Working," demanding that the Board's general counsel be fired because, "Kintz has . . . failed to act on all but a handful of the hundreds of charges of unfair labor practices our union has filed. His policy is to deal with law violations only after elections are held."

The Board had many problems in setting up and administering elections so that workers could decide which union they want or whether they want one at all. First, while most farmworkers are Spanish-speaking, there are many Filipinos, Arabs and workers from the Punjab section of India. Translators had to be provided and ballots printed in the various languages. Second, California is a huge state. The primary field work takes place as far south as Calexico and as far north as Marysville, an area 550 miles long and 50 to 80 miles wide. (Driving from Calexico to Marysville is like the trip from Washington, DC to Chicago.) Third, there has never been an experience like this in the history of American labor, and the Board has to make critical decisions for which there was no clear precedent. The experience of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ought to be of help. However, it was because Congress, in 1935, specifically excluded farmworkers from NLRB protection that the dispute between the Teamsters and the UFW had been left unresolved. Although Chavez once favored inclusion under the National Labor Relations Act, he decided that provisions of the act would be damaging to his union. Instead, the California law was written to be different from the NLRA, and as a result, the Board had to establish its own rules on everything from the right of organizers to have access to workers to where the elections should be held. Decisions were disputed at Board meetings, in the press and in the courts. In March, the California Supreme Court upheld the ALRB decision giving organizers access to the fields—contrary to NLRB rulings—and the growers appealed. The issue will finally be decided by the US Supreme Court.

By February, after holding over 400 elections in less than five months, the Board ran out of money. Most of the elections have not been certified. The results of 50 elections are "in question." There was no way of knowing that there would be so many elections, that so many more are still needed, that there would be so many disputes and court battles, and that the Board would have to hire so many translators, lawyers and other personnel. The governor asked the legislature for an emergency appropriation of \$3.8 million to see the Board through June when its regular appropriation comes up. However, a two-thirds vote is needed for an emergency appropriation, and the growers and Teamsters joined forces to block the funds. They said they had been betrayed by Jerry Brown, who promised to appoint a neutral board, and it was because of his personal assurances—made during the late-night

meetings—that they originally agreed to support the law. They threatened to block funding unless the legislature agreed to amend the Act, which it refused to do. An appropriations vote failed in the state senate and in March the ALRB closed its offices and suspended operations.

In February Chavez called the failure to grant funds “a day of infamy” and said, “Growers are stabbing farm workers and the people of California in the back. It is an act of treachery that threatens the peace and progress achieved in five short months under the Agricultural Labor Relations Act.” He threatened to “pin agriculture to the wall” and announced a new boycott. The boycott is intended to force the growers, whom he has identified as the ringleaders of the appropriations fight, to force their legislators to change their minds. Chavez also announced that the UFW would go directly to the voters by introducing an initiative on the November ballot. It is one of the peculiarities of California law that the voters can bypass the legislature and vote directly for new laws. Chavez said that passing a farmworker initiative would make it impossible for growers to again sabotage the law. Chavez also asked the Church to hold farmworker elections in the interim. Board Chairman Roger Mahony, who is a Roman Catholic bishop, asked the Church not to intervene, warning that Church-run elections would not be binding and would only add to the confusion.

Chavez had made an about-face. Marc Grossman explained, “Agricultural Labor Relations Board practices have improved greatly since the United Farm Workers White Paper was issued and Cesar Chavez’ article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*.” Actually, the only change in the Board was the resignation, for personal reasons, of a UFW supporter, a change hardly to Chavez’ advantage.

At the beginning of March, Governor Brown flew to La Paz to talk to his friend Cesar Chavez. On March 12, Brown announced his candidacy for President. On March 18, the California assembly passed the emergency finance bill for the ALRB. On March 29, *The Washington Post* carried a front-page article analyzing Brown’s presidential aspirations, “[T]he Farm Labor Board, which is generally praised as his outstanding achievement, is now dormant and broke.” At the beginning of April, Leroy Chatfield, a former member of Chavez’ staff, resigned from the Agricultural Labor Relations Board in order to help run Brown’s presidential campaign. On April 19, the Governor’s office announced another resignation, leaving the Board without a quorum. State Senator David Roberti (D, LA), floor leader of the appropriations fight, returned from the Easter recess pessimistic about the legislature’s chances of passing the emergency measure. Reacting to the latest Board resignation and that of the general counsel three days earlier, Roberti said, “Right now, for all intents and purposes, there is not only a non-funded Board, but no Board at all.”

After July 1st, the Board’s regular appropriations come up, but control in the assembly of a critical subcommittee may mean that under the rules another two thirds vote may be needed. According to *Sacramento Bee* reporter James Dufur, “It’s the kind of thing you have to watch day to day. Anything can happen.” It seems fairly certain, however, that at some point the Board will be back in operation. Late in April, the UFW announced that it had secured well over the 312,404 valid signatures needed to put the farmworker initiative on the November ballot, and the initiative is expected to win approval.

Even though the Board does not have money or a quorum, the ALRA is still law. As a result, Chavez knows that the contracts he has signed cannot be taken from him. While the budget crisis has held up elections and prevented possible UFW victories, Chavez is in a better position politically because the whole brouhaha seems like a Teamster-grower conspiracy with Chavez cast in the role of underdog. The longer the issue remains unresolved, the more it will strengthen his political power.

Chavez talks like a defeated man. He continues to pay his staff members \$5 a week “because we are a poor union,” and so his staff continues to be unprofessional, inefficient, and composed of a surprising number of white liberals who are supported by their parents or who live on food stamps. He has invested so much in the image of himself as a poor religious man who is head of a poor religious movement fighting a losing battle with the large corporations and the American political structure that he refuses to give up the image. Asked about his political power, he said, “We are a weak movement.” Yet, he talks with relish about the “electrifying effect” on rural areas when Mexicans (most California farmworkers are Mexican citizens working in the US as permanent resident aliens) become naturalized and vote. “Right now, it is more difficult to influence the decisions on the Delano city council than on the Congress of the United States,” he said.

Rep. Ron Dellums (D, Cal.) says that he owes his election to Congress to Chavez’ active campaigning in his district, which helped carry the critical Chicano vote. “Whenever Cesar’s in town,” Dellums said, “he knows that my office is his office.” Even for more traditional liberal politicians, especially those from union districts, Chavez’ leadership is important and his animus is a political liability. Chavez is at home with the heads of America’s largest corporations and with the country’s most powerful labor leaders. He is involved with presidential politics. Yet Chavez, who is 49, talks about being an old man. He says that his goal in life is to win union recognition for farmworkers. It is a goal he has already achieved. For the second time, he is head of a powerful labor union, but having won union recognition, he does not know quite what to do with it.

Copyright of New Republic is the property of New Republic and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of New Republic is the property of TNR II, LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.