MICHAEL NICHOLS / MAGNUM

Chavez's once powerful United Farm Workers is floundering. Field organizing is at a standstill; there has not been a major strike in six years.

Cesar Chavez's Fall from Grace

By Jeff Coplon

Drive south from Delano down Route 99, and you'll cut through lush California fields of Emperor grapes, neat groves of delicate almond trees. But turn east past Bakersfield, and the terrain begins to change. Ahead lie the foothills of the Tehachapis—bare parched mounds the color of oatmeal with too much brown sugar. This is bone-dry country, prefiguring the Mojave Desert just beyond. Plant life is limited to goldenrod and Western oaks with burnt-blackish leaves. Irrigation pumps churn like gray praying mantises. You don't see many people along this road. There's an occasional cow looking to graze, and that's about it.

Cesar Chavez traced this very path in 1971, when he moved the United Farm Workers headquarters out of Delano and into isolation. At the time he was a revered figure in the pantheon of the left, a sad-eyed, seventh-grade dropout who fasted for weeks and quoted St. Paul and forged tools of power for the most exploited people in the nation. A man, in short, who'd achieved a rare state of grace.

Since then the UFW had slipped from the liberal agenda. *Viva la huelga!* no longer echoed from living rooms in Beverly Hills and the West Village. Yet our image of Chavez remained intact, still bathed in the soft light of the '60s.

But lately the legend has taken a beating, at least in California. There were reports that the union had forsaken grass-roots organizing, pouring money instead into radio stations and bumbling right-wing candidates. That top organizers had been purged amid fits of red-baiting. And that Chavez had squelched internal dissent in Salinas by suing rank and file leaders for $25 million.

After weeks of futile phone calls, I decided to seek out Chavez unannounced. At the Keene Store—"souvenirs, toys, laundry"—my waitress tells me I'll never get through, "not unless you have permission. They've run several people out. They stay pretty much to themselves."

I get back in my car, make the blind left turn, take the unmarked road down a long winding drive. At the bottom, a wooden sign: "Nuestra Senora de La Paz (Our Lady of Peace)/Educational Retreat Center/Private." There's also a glassed-in guard booth. Contrary to local rumor, there are no armed guards. There are no guards at all. At 12:30 p.m. the booth is empty: lunchtime.

In fact, the whole place looks deserted—300 acres of rutted drives, bare earth, and one-story frame buildings with peeling paint. Only the rusty tracks of the Southern Pacific vary the landscape.

I ring up Paul Chavez, Cesar's 27-year-old son and the union's chief lobbyist, who's home from Sacramento on a recess. He meets me 10 minutes later at an administration building. Paul is a chubby, amiable guy; his nickname is Bubbles. "What are you *doing* here?" he says. He's wearing old jeans with a hole in one knee, an Oakland A's baseball cap, and a two-day stubble. He agrees to walk me through the place.

La Paz was constructed early in this century as a TB sanatorium called Stonybrook Retreat. In the old red-handkerchief days, Kern County was known to send healthy Chicano kids along with the sick to inflate its state reimbursement. When the UFW moved in, its first job was to wash bloodstains from the interior walls.

About 150 people live here year round, either in trailers or one-time patient dormitories. The old children's ward, a handsome stucco structure with a red-tiled roof, now houses the law library. The old doctors' residence is now the computer center, a $500,000 information bank. The UFW prizes high technology. It's spent $5 million in grant money on a microwave communication system to link its field offices with La Paz. (On the other hand, it saves on salaries. Paul, for one, gets $10 a week, plus room and board.)

We pass a parking lot filled with new Rabbit diesels for the staff. But Cesar Chavez, Paul notes, still drives a '77 Dodge. He and his wife live in a simple two-bedroom frame house. It's set off in a private compound, rimmed with barbed wire. As we walk along the perimeter, a very alert black German shepherd keeps pace just inside the fence. "He's a big sissy, just a puppy," Paul says.

Then we come to the print shop, an ugly concrete building with modern offset equipment. It's Paul's pet project, the nerve center for the union's direct-mail boycotts. "We started looking at these evangelist guys, the New Right—they're pretty slick," Paul says. "So we talked to different guys, and we said, 'Do you think we can do a boycott through the mail?' And they said, 'You can sell politicians, you can sell a boycott, you can sell *God* through the mail.' "

We step inside, turn a corner, and see three men standing in conversation. The first is a tall blond printer with a German accent named Claus. The second is Claus's apprentice, a bashful young Chicano named Lupe. The third is a diminutive older man, his black hair swept across his forehead and streaked with gray. His face is very brown. He's wearing sky blue, double-knit slacks and polished burgundy wingtips. A sizeable paunch peeks through an open-necked sports shirt. His breast pocket bulges with a pair of black-framed sunglasses.

"You're in luck," Paul says. "I didn't even know he was here."

As it develops, Cesar Chavez is not a tough interview at all. "Anything you want," he says. But first there's something to be settled: what to do with the union's old press after a new model comes in? With half an eye on me, Cesar declares that the union "should give it to someone in the Movement who needs it—some Chicano group, some black group, some women's group, the nuclear freeze . . . "

As usual, Paul is enthusiastic. "The nuclear freeze! That's a *good* idea."

"But don't give them junk," his father admonishes. "Fix it up. We should give them good stuff." His voice is a modulated sing-song with some gravel in it, lilting at the end of each phrase. "This union was built by people helping us all over the world. We got to help them back. We have a commitment."

We all move outside again, to a yard of dry, cracked earth being leveled to expand the print shop. "Where's our construction crew—on strike?" Cesar asks. He smiles, but it's not the boyish grin you see on the back of the old book jackets. It's a tight little move that draws back

This is the first of two parts

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"I don't understand," the printer says.

"Do you believe in the women's movement?" The little smile still plays at Chavez's lips.

"I don't know," says Claus. He looks very uncomfortable. "I'm not much for politics . . . "

An hour later, I find the president's office to be the size of a suburban den. Books on every imaginable subject line one wall. Nearby hangs a simple wooden cross. On a shelf, between portraits of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, rests a relic of the bad old days: *el cortito*, a six-inch short-handled hoe, the kind that curved workers' spines before Jerry Brown banned it in 1975. An inlaid metal strip is inscribed: "*Si se puede.*" It *can* be done.

Chavez is seated behind a large oak desk. He looks tired, puffy. The day before he'd returned from the AFL-CIO convention in Florida, then stayed late at a fund-raiser in San Bernardino.

"It's a see-saw battle, like checkmating," he's saying. "You know the damn growers; they're doing whatever they can to get out of the union . . . " He muffles a belch. "They're still killing our people and maiming our people."

These are difficult times, Chavez says, and it's not the UFW's fault. The union is "just beginning to get over" the Teamsters wars of six years ago. Professional scabs make new strikes impossible, he claims. The state's farm labor law has been hopelessly "screwed up" by the growers and their endless appeals.

"Delay, delay, delay," says Chavez, shaking his head. "The court has never awarded one fucking [monetary] settlement. Isn't that amazing?" Pause. "Isn't that amazing?"

But yes, he says, the union is still active in the fields. It's just doing it more efficiently. In 1975, it would have "maybe 20 organizers [in an area]. Now we're using two or three and having the same success. . . . We were trying to force organizing down [the workers'] throats, instead of letting them organize themselves."

Chavez is more animated now. His small hands sculpt the air—chopping, waving, the music to his words. "In fact, there's an argument that we don't *want* to organize because if we can't get contracts, it's bad for the union. . . . " An ingratiating smile. "You have to write this really well, or it will look bad. . . . There's just so many fucking delays and the growers are breaking the law left and right."

He winces. The back is acting up again. He sways forward, then tilts sideways from the waist. I ask whether the recent exodus of top UFW organizers had left a gap. No, says Chavez, the spots were quickly filled; the old leaders weren't all

FARM WORKERS IN THE '60S. PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL FUSCO / MAGNUM

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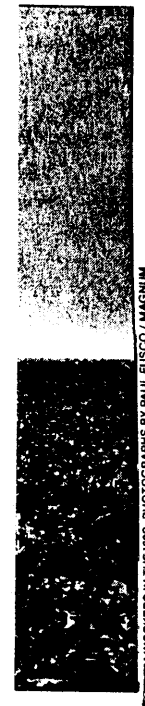

WORKERS IN THE '60S. PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL FUSCO / MAGNUM

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"In the early days, positions were not really earned, they were conferred. People weren't here that long, and we needed someone to do something, so I said, 'You do this.' I *gave* them jobs."

And the split with the union's own paid reps in Salinas? Chavez shook his head with a pitying smile. "Those poor guys, they were being used. By [Jose] Renteria. I always suspected he was a fink. I think he was paid by the growers."

"He broke a mushroom strike," adds Paul, who's been listening all the while.

"The son-of-a-bitch," says Chavez. "No, he's an asshole.... He tried to agitate against the union. A real asshole." Even when cursing, Chevaz never raises his voice, never rushes his words.

But wasn't the libel suit excessive?

"Everyone knows the $25 million isn't aimed at those guys," Chavez answers. "We're bludgeoning the son-of-a-bitch [attorney] that's behind the suit—what's his name? Siegel. I've heard he's been approached by the right-to-work committee and been given money."

(In fact, Dan Siegel is a noted Oakland liberal who specializes in union democracy cases. In the early 1970s he was arrested on a UFW picket line at a supermarket. Later he contributed hundreds of hours of pro bono work to the union. In 1975, Chavez wrote Siegel to thank him for his "assistance in helping to build this strong and democratic union for farm workers.")

Further questions about the dissidents make Chavez impatient. He raises his head, bores his brown eyes into mine. "Do you believe what we're telling you?" The voice stays low but the eyes are snapping. "Are you going to do a number on us? I'll give you all the information. But tell the truth, or we'll never talk to you again."

Before leaving, I ask Chavez about the UFW's future—would it survive after he's gone?

"Sure, I'm worried," he replies. "The symbol, that's one thing that will be hard to replace. But the work, that can be done."

For now, it's a moot point. The only president the union has ever known has no plans to retire. "Fifty-six these days is a pretty young age in leadership for unions," he says.

A final thought. There are those who say Cesar Chavez has grown too fond of power. How would he respond?

"That," says the once and future of the UFW, "is bullshit."

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Last September, a 21-year-old dairy worker named Rene Lopez voted in a union representation election at Sikkema Family Farm, near Fresno. He then returned to company housing to watch television, 200 yards from the polling place. At 4 p.m. the owner's son-in-law drove a car by the site. Lopez, a UFW supporter who'd helped petition for the election, was summoned outside. As he approached the car, a gun poked out the passenger window. Lopez was shot through the forehead. He never regained consciousness.

And so Rene Lopez became an official martyr of the UFW—the fifth worker or volunteer to be killed since *la causa* burst to the surface with its first strike in 1965. In the shooting's aftermath, Cesar Chavez blasted his arch-adversary, Governor George Deukmejian, for cutting funds to the state's Agricultural Labor Relations Board and failing to enforce the state's labor law. Later, at the funeral, he called Lopez "a martyr for justice... Rene is gone because he dared to hope and he dared to live out his hope."

The UFW's president had spoken similar words before. For Nagi Dafailah and Juan de la Cruz and Nan Freeman and Rufino Contreras. It was always such a waste. Yet these deaths had rallied the troops—reminded them of the stakes involved in the $14 billion arena of California agribusiness. They'd march the extra mile, crank up the boycott one more notch.

But not this time. Today there is no outlet for that kind of passion in the UFW: no strikes, no picket lines. The Sikkema election may not be resolved for a year or more; 15 of 24 votes were challenged. But even if the UFW wins, there's a growing sentiment here that Rene Lopez spilled his life for a lost cause—for a union that is played out and paranoid, respected neither by growers nor workers, and led by a man who has swapped principles for power.

The truth is that martyrs don't make a movement.

Despite the most favorable labor law in the country and little competition in the fields, the UFW is floundering. Of 250,000 farm laborers in California, the union estimates 30,000—at most—work under UFW contracts, about half the number 12 years ago. Field organizing is at a standstill; it's been six years since the last major strike. Fresno County, the premier farm county in the United States, is virtually untouched by the union. Elsewhere some of the largest unionized farms are going under, a minority unable to compete.

Meanwhile, the union devotes its resources to dubious electioneering and the direct-mail boycotts, currently aimed at chains in the East and Midwest which stock nonunion lettuce. There is little or no picketing; no one even has to talk to a consumer. The work is done by computer, which targets "sympathetic" precincts for the mailing lists.

Watching it all are the farm workers—still exploited, still impoverished. For all the dramatic gains of the 1970s, their average wage stands at $4.60 an hour. Today's typical UFW contract calls for token raises at less than the rate of inflation. Some growers are actually cutting pay by 10 and 25 per cent; others would, except they're already at the minimum. Of the 11 U.S. communities with the highest proportion of welfare-recipients,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL FUSCO / MAGNUM

At its peak, the La Causa represented perhaps the broadest alliance in labor history.

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six are in the San Joaquin Valley.

And what of Cesar Chavez? Even today he remains a symbol of an emerging Hispanic culture. In a recent poll by the *Los Angeles Times*, he was named "the Latino admired most by other Latinos"; he got twice as many votes as either Ricardo Montalban or Fernando Valenzuela.

As Chavez sees it, he and the union have merely shifted with the times. "It's the same war, but the battle lines have changed," he told me. "The workers still want the union. However bad it might be, it's still better than what they had."

But in the grape arbors of Delano and the lettuce fields of Salinas, the days are still long, the people still poor, and hope as rare as a rain in July.

"You should talk to many people to get the truth: that Chavez is not a saint or a god," said a young grape picker as he squatted on the brown grass near his trailer. "Because I have been here for 10 years"—he angrily flicked his spent cigarette to the ground—"and he's not helped me a bit."

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"We protect our farmers. They are our best people," said an assistant sheriff during a 1933 cotton strike in Corcoran. "But the Mexicans are trash.... We herd them like pigs."

It was no mere figure of speech. Farm workers of the 1930s, Mexicans and Anglos alike, were treated with less care than the growers' cattle. They lived out of battered cars or shacks of boards and weeds. They were paid, according to a National Labor Board Commissioner, "less than a starvation wage"; families of 10 made $2 a day. There were regular epidemics of pneumonia and typhoid fever. Eating beans and potatoes, women commonly miscarried three and four years in a row.

And in Tulare County, just north of Delano, where they'd start in the cotton fields at the age of five, the homeless children of migrant workers died at the rate of two each day.

Cesar Chavez was luckier than most. He was raised on his grandfather's farm near Yuma, Arizona. Livestock and a vegetable garden assured that no one went hungry. Best of all was the large adobe hacienda, with 18-inch walls that kept it cool in summer, warm in winter. There was a favorite tree to climb and a corral where young Cesar tamed gray stallions and rode calves bareback.

It all came to an abrupt end in 1937, when Cesar was 10 and his family was evicted for back taxes and water bills. He would never get over it. "I missed that house," he'd recall, more than 30 years later. "When I was living there... it seemed like the whole world belonged to us."

In the years to follow, as his family blurred into California's migrant stream, he "no longer felt free. I was like a wild duck with its wings clipped." Home was now a roadside tent, or a labor camp without plumbing or electricity. Often they were terrorized by the border patrol—especially Cesar's mother, who knew no English.

Hate followed them. "White trade only." "No dogs or Mexicans allowed." Once, in Brawley, Cesar and his brother Richard took their shoeshine earnings to a hamburger joint. After Cesar ordered, the counter girl laughed them away: "Goddamn dumb Mex!" Richard, who was two years younger, cursed in anger. Not Cesar. The rejection made him cry. That laugh, he'd recall, "rang in my ears for twenty years—it seemed to cut us out of the human race."

A generation later, when Chavez founded the National Farmworkers Association, he went about creating that community he'd missed. He recruited worker by worker, family by family. Through numbing road trips and 18-hour days, he thrived in the act of connecting. His philosophy was simple: "When you pick grapes, you pick a bunch at a time. Eventually you pick the whole vineyard. Organizing is no different.... But people aren't going to come to you, you have to go to them."

And Chavez was persuasive. Only five foot six, he moved with grace and purpose. He had an Indian's bow nose, jet-black hair that would not quite stay combed, and an irresistible grin. He was modest, rarely using the first-person singular. He spoke softly, preferring irony to rhetoric. And soon word got around that Chavez was the man to see about trouble in the Valley.

Those early days of the NFWA, however, were hardly the one-man show some chroniclers have implied. Aside from Richard and cousin Manuel Chavez, there were several other young movers on hand: Dolores Huerta, the sharp-tongued hotel-keeper's daughter who'd met Cesar at the Community Service Organization; Gil Padilla and Antonio Orendain, also CSO alumni; rank and file leaders like Epifano Camacho. It was a calculated group decision to put Chavez forward, to use his personality as a tool to build the movement.

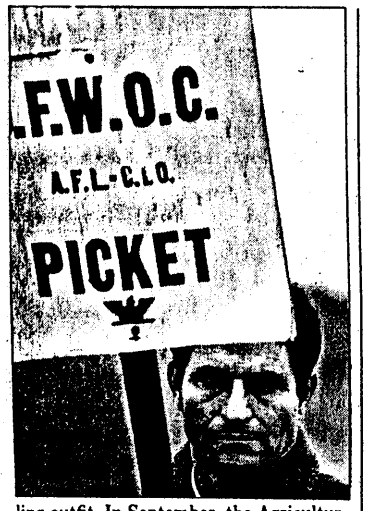
"We wanted him to be the leader because he spoke English, he was a citizen, he knew the law," Camacho recalled.

"He was smarter and nicer and more charismatic and cuter," said Padilla. "Most of the membership thought he was infallible, but he didn't do a lot of things they said he did. He was our speaker and our bookkeeper—he took care of the money."

In any case, Chavez took to shaping *la causa* to his own taste. He wanted to build this movement slowly and surely. He wasn't fond of strikes, never would be. They were so expensive, so prone to violence, so hard to control.

But his hand was forced in early 1965 by Camacho, a barrel-chested McFarland rose grafter. The nursery workers were being cheated, Camacho said. They were supposed to get $10 per 1000 plants, but the growers were withholding $2 in "bonuses." Chavez reluctantly agreed to help organize a strike, but kept it small and quiet. Four days later the growers caved in.

Events were overtaking Chavez's fledg-



ling outfit. In September, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Commitee, a Filipino affiliate of the AFL-CIO, struck the Delano grape growers after a wage cut from $1.40 to $1 an hour. Larry Itliong, the AWOC leader, marched into the NFWA office. Would Chavez stand beside them or scab against them?

It was a tough call. Chavez had 1200 members but only 200 were paying dues. There was $87 in the treasury, nothing for strike benefits.

As he waffled, many of his people began to cross the picket lines. Finally, a week after the walkout started, after it had spread to 2000 workers and nine ranches, the NFWA voted to join. Chavez hadn't been afraid of the growers' power, he'd acknowledge later on: "I was afraid of the weakness of the people."

And so began *la huelga*.

Within five years, the farm workers forged perhaps the broadest alliance in labor history. Chavez pushed for and won a merger with AWOC. The picket lines were packed with pachucos from East Los Angeles and clerics from San Diego, with Berkeley dropouts and little old ladies from Pasadena. Walter Reuther and Ethel Kennedy, SNCC and SDS and CORE—all were welcome.

When the first grape strike faltered after widespread scabbing, the boycott took up the slack. By 1969, 12 per cent of the nation's adult population—17 million people—had stopped buying grapes. Sales in New York City were down 90 per cent. Prices plunged by one-third. Of the Coachella Valley's 200 grape ranchers, 140 went out of business.

Cesar Chavez was *news*. He was far from a great public speaker, but even that became a virtue. Listeners warmed to his lack of bombast. They loved his unvarying worker's uniform: worn Levis, open-necked cotton shirts, scuffed hush puppies.

Liberal writers like Peter Matthiessen and John Gregory Dunne made their pilgrimages to Delano and came away with books that fed the legend. Chavez was a "moral obsessive," a "radical Mexican mystic," a cross between Christ and Zapata. "*Viva la causa!*" now had a companion chant: "*Viva Chavez!*"

But the man kept his bearings. Our strength lies in the workers, he'd remind his staff. Never think that *we* are the union; the farm workers put us here.

And his staff would listen. "He was very alive, it was very exciting to be around him," a former aide recalled. "And he had a tremendous gift, beyond empathy. When he talked with you, he let you know you were the whole world for him. People were very drawn to that."

Chavez read Gandhi's autobiography as if it were a personal prescription. But he also read Churchill, Gandhi's adversary, and Goebbels and Machiavelli. He may never have actually organized a strike or a boycott, as his critics claim. But he had an undeniably sound grasp of how to manipulate power—and a willingness to spend himself as coin. In 1966 he marched from Delano to Sacramento with a leg swollen to his thigh. In 1968, after workers began to retaliate against grower violence, he fasted for 21 days—a *penitencia*, he called it.

That summer the union blitzed the barrios for Bobby Kennedy and played a pivotal role in his California primary victory. Chavez would support many other politicians. But he'd never trust another so completely. And he'd never again have the privacy he craved. After Kennedy was shot, Chavez would go nowhere without bodyguards. To help out, he acquired two German shepherd attack dogs. He named them Huelga and Boycott.

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Delano is a low-slung town of 18,000 in the center of the San Joaquin Valley, a rich oval basin that could swallow New Jersey. Twenty-five miles to the east jut the green-and-purple tiers of the Sierra Nevadas; 25 miles to the west slope the gentler foothills of the Temblors and Diablos. In between stretch vast seas of green, flat as a pool table, fertile as the valley of the Nile.

They raise cotton and almonds and a dozen other major crops, but Delano is best known for its vineyards. The immediate area produces half the world's table grapes: Thompson Seedless, Emperors, Ribiers, Calmerias.

It was from here that Chavez led his first strike, where his people were sprayed with sulfur and struck by speeding trucks. And it was here, too, that warehouses burned along the railroad tracks, that Teamster gorillas punched out prounion priests—and that George Wallace found more than a few willing ears. If this was *la causa*'s cradle, it was also the heart of its darkest resistance.

After the trauma of the 1960s and early '70s, Delano's much calmer these days. There's barely a trace of its most famous ex-citizen, Cesar Chavez. His yellow bungalow on Kensington Street has been remodeled; a carpenter lives there now. The old stucco office on Albany Street is a Pentecostal church. The Forty Acres, once the proud national headquarters, has all the character of a remote, weed-strewn field office, which it is.

As of last harvest, only 15 of the area's 70 grape growers were under UFW contract. There have been no elections or strikes here since 1981. "It's [up to] the workers' initiative," said Juan Cervantes, one of three full-time staffers for the region. "It's spontaneous. I work with workers who are *seeking* union recognition. I don't impose."

Were there any organizing drives in progress. "Not right now," Cervantes conceded. "We're gathering data, that's about it."

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In 1975, under the friendly auspices of Governor Jerry Brown, the UFW won passage of the best labor law in the country: the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. At the time, the union eagle was barely breathing. The Teamsters, who signed sweetheart contracts and were bluntly favored by the growers, had raided Chavez's people. The UFW's membership had slipped to 2500. But over the next 12 months, the union would win more than 200 elections conducted by the ARLB.

So far, so good. But agribusiness was determined to repeal, or at least defang, the law and its enforcement agency. By 1976 the UFW's drive was on to pass Proposition 14, which would have guaranteed the agency's future by amending the state constitution.

Both labor and industry poured all they had into the battle. It was supposed to be close. It wasn't. The referendum lost by a two-to-one margin.

When he heard the results, Chavez broke down and cried, walked off by himself. Some of his closest colleagues sensed a change after that. In the past, no matter what the mistake, Chavez and the staff had always been able to talk it over, to learn from what went wrong. But the only postmortems after Prop 14 were private, ugly things, whispers and recriminations. Chavez would not discuss it. ■