Cesar Chavez's Fall from Grace

By Jeff Coplon

Drive south from Delano down Route 395 and you're not far from two California fields of Emperor grapes, vast groves of delicate asparagus. But turn east past Bakersfield, and the terrain begins to change. Ahead is the floodwalls of the San Joaquin—the parched mud and wilted ooze of asparagus with too much brown sugar.

This is bone-dry country, populating the Mojave Desert just beyond. Plant life is limited to goldenrod and Western oaks with burnt-black 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 this isolation. At the time he was a revered figure in the pantheon of the left, a red-eyed, seventh-grade dropout who faked 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 rate of grace.

Since then the UFW has slipped from the liberal agenda. View is buried in the lonesome lives of Bakersfield and the West Valley. Yet our image of Chavez remained intact, still baked in the soft light of the 70's.

But lately the legend has taken a beating, at least in California. These were times when the union had forsaken grain-corn-some wheat-growing, pouring money into steel into radio stations and building high-wing cars. That top organizers had been purged amid all of this.

batting. And that Chavez had squashed internal dissent in Salinas by using rank and the tactics for $25 million.

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

I got back in my car, made the blind left turn, took 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.unchurch.

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

Ring up Paul Chavez, Cesar's 27-year-old son and the eventual heir to the family's business, 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 Butchie. "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 T.B. sanatorium called Stony brooks Retreat. In the old red-handkerchief days, Kern County was known to send healthy Chicoano kids along with the sick to fellow 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 $45 million in grant money on a microwave communication system to link the field offices with La Paz. On the other hand, it raves on salaries. For one, one $10 a week, plus room and board.

We pass a parking lot filled with new Rabbitdirect for the staff. But Cesar Chavez, Paul notes, still drives a '77 Dodge. He and his wife live in a single two-bedroom 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 boy, just a puppy," Paul says.

Then we come to the print shop, an ugly concrete building with modern off-the-shelf 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 stop inside, turn a corner, and see three men standing in conversation. They're a tall, blind printer with a German accent named Cleo. The second is Cesar's apprentice, a baldish young Chicoano named Lope. 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 martial speech peaks 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 Chicoano 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 adds. "Fix it up. We should give them good stuff."

His voice is a melodist that rings with some gravitas in it, lasting at the end of each phrase. "This union was built by people helping one over the world. We got to help them back. We have a commitment."

We all move outside again, to a yard of dried dirt earth being leveled to expand the print shop, "Where's our construction crew—on strike?" Cesar asks. He smiles, "But it's not the boats you see on the back of the old book jackets. It's a tight little more than cheap labor."

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corners of his mouth, showing
too much teeth. A headroom was
He turns to his, who’s been hired as a
rushed professional until Lope can
said, “Do you believe in the women’s
The little smile still plays at Cha-
vear’s lips.

I don’t know,” said Claus. He looks
very uncomfortable. “I’m not much for
politics…”

An hour later, I find the president’s
office to be the site of a subterranean
discussion. Books on every imaginable subject line the
wall. Nearly hang a simple wooden
clock. On a shelf, between portraits of
Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther
King, rest a relief of the Help of Isadore
Bono, a six-inch short-handled hoe, the
kind that curved workers’ spines before
Jerry Brown banned it in 1975. An infield
metal strip is inscribed: “To see poodles. It

can be done.

Chavez is seated behind a large oak
desk. He looks tired, puffy. The day be-
fore he had 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 checkmat-
ing,” he’s saying. “You know the damn
growers; they’re doing whatever they can
to get out of the union…” He muffs a
thump. “They’re still killing our people
and making our lives.”

These are the times, Chavez says,
and it’s not the UFW’s fault. The union is
just beginning to get organized in the Stan-
ford areas of six years ago. Professional
salaries are under attack, union leaders
claim. The state’s farm labor law has been
dismissed, “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) settle-
ment, isn’t that amazing?” Even “isn’t that amazing?”

But yes, he says, the union is still
active in the fields. It’s just doing it more
efficiently. In 1970, it would have “maybe
20 organizers [in an area]. Now we’re us-
ing two or three and having the same success…”We were trying to force or-

nizing down [the workers’] threats, in-
stead of letting them organize themselves.

Chavez is more animated now. His
small hands clench the paper, gripping
it to his mouth. “In fact, there’s an argument that we don’t want
to organize because if we can’t get con-
tacts, it’s bad for the union…” An
ingratiating smile. “You have to write
this really well, or it will look bad…
That’s just so many fucking delays and
the growers are breaking the law left and
right.”

He winces. The back issetting up again.
He paws forward, then stops sideways
from the waist. I ask whether the secret
stand in the UFW organizers had left a
gap. No, says Chavez, the spots were
quickly filled; the old leaders weren’t all

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that special, after all.

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 give you this." And I split with the union's own paid reps in Salinas. Chavez shook his fist at me, saying, "Those poor guys, they were being lied to. By [union] Remenda. I always suspected he was a fool."

He broke a mushroom strike," adds Paul, who's been doing all the while. "I'm on the committee, too... He tried to agree to the union. A real mistake.

Even when existing, Chavez never gave his voice, neverระว�s his words.

But wasn't the liberal suit excessive?

"Everyone knows the $5 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?" I heard he's been approached by the right-to-work commit-
mite and been given money.

In fact, Dan Siegel is a noted Oakland liberal who specializes in union democracy cases. In the early 70's he was accused of a UFW picket line at a supermarket.

Later he contributed hundreds of thousands of pro-bono work to the union. In 1975, Chavez wrote Siegel to thank him for his "existence in helping to build this strong and democratic union for farm workers.

Further questions about the dissidents make Chavez impatient. He holds the phone to his eye, into my eyes. "Do you believe what we're saying? The voice stops but the eyes are snapping. "Are you going to a union meeting?" He gives 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 problem is that the organization will have to be restructured."

For now, it's a moot point. The only president the union has ever known has no plans to retire. "If we can do these days, a pretty young age in leadership for farmworkers," he says.

A final thought. There are those who say Larry Chavez has grown too used to power. How would he respond?

"That's the area and future of the UFW, is bullshit."

Last September, a 21-year-old dairy worker named Rene Lopez voted in a union representation election at the Sikkle Family Farm, near Fresno. He returned to company house to watch the results. At 4 p.m. the owner's car was being driven to the site. Lopez, a UFW supporter who helped organize for the election, was summoned outside. As he was pushed into the car, it jerked out the passenger window. Lopez was shot through the head. He never regained consciousness.

All this to prevent one thing, so René Lopez became an official martyr to the UFW—who worked to volunteer to be killed since he was able to have his death documented in 1960. In the shooting's aftermath, Cesar Chavez, George Deukmejian, and state installations made sure the state was publicized labor relations law and failing the state's.
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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 His-
nicpanic culture. In a recent poll by the Los

The Times, he was named "the La-

Cesar was living there...it's not

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a city known for its cotton fields and its red
cabbage. His children were migrant workers from

The 1960s was a time of

Cesar Chavez was more than a

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