Cesar Chavez’s Fall from Grace, Part II

By Jeff Coplen

Fifteen years ago, Cesar Chavez was a revered figure of the left. A self-taught activist who fasted for weeks and quoted St. Paul, he strove to empower the most exploited people in the United States—the farm workers who generated $14 billion a year to California’s agronomic output. After achieving some early success, Chavez fell hard times—and out of liberal fashion. Once a bold fearless leader, he was now an old ally and making new and dubious friends. This is the second of two parts.

By 1971, the United Farm Workers seemed ready to dominate the farm labor scene in California. For out of touch with some machinery, the Agricultural Labor Relations Board was a decade behind the times. There was no longer an innovative drug therapy program that had grown out of the earlier United Farm Workers leaflet which read: "The union is the people's own. It grows strong as the people get involved in it. Your union as the working class. It is not a union which will do the work for you. It is a union of the working class which will do the work for you."

The union was a new way of living, a new way of thinking, a new way of understanding the world. Chavez believed in a world where the power of the people could be used to change the world. He believed in a world where the working class could be the leaders of change. He believed in a world where the people had the power to change their own lives.

Cesar Chavez (left) was intrigued with Syrson founder Charles Dederich’s (right) techniques for group pressure and mind control.

Other UFW leaders weren’t so pleased. As a sensitivity session for addicts, The Game was seen as a waste of time. As an administrative “tool” in a union, it promoted group activity, fear, and conformity. Players would find the things they said were used against them—especially if they were out of the loop with Chavez. "We lost a lot of [staff] people," said Gil Padilla, then the secretary-treasurer. "The union seemed to drift away from the fields. Chavez pushed a motion through the executive board to defer new organizing for a period of "consolidation."

In 1976, Chavez was convicted of conspiracy to murder an attorney by having a rackets staff in the lawyer’s mail box. He was sentenced to five years probation. Dederich was acquitted of a similar charge in 1977. But he stood opposed to anyone in the UFW with "political hang-ups or hidden agendas."

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In 1977, Chavez was a member of the California State Assembly. He was known as a man of the people, a man of the land, a man of the earth. He was respected by many, feared by others. He was a man who stood up for what he believed in, no matter the cost.

And Chavez? He seemed ever more distant. He fired off memos on high phone bills and stayed off the phone at his La Paz, but offered little guidance on contract talks. In the old days, an aide encountered him. It was "really good to work with the guy because he had a really good mind. If you had a problem you could get on the phone, and get a good perspective."

But he came to the point where there was dead silence and "Just do what you want."
Cesar Chavez (left) with his cousin, Manuel Chavez

Marshall Ganz, talented and loyal, resigned from the UFW in frustration. The union office lacked adequate staff for planning and arbitration. Workers betrayed him with seclusion and isolation. While Salinas was the union’s stronghold, with more than 700 member jobs in the area, La Paz decided to open a credit union there. After reports to the leadership were unheeded, the raids decided to take their case to the state convention in Fresno. That summer they formed a statewide grass roots union to challenge the exec-utive board candidates hand-picked by Chavez. The state was headed by Joaquin Renteria, a mild-mannered politician who had previously di-rected the Salinas area office. He was Bateman’s antagonist, as far as Chavez was concerned. What scared him most about the change was that he now had to force our President Cesar Chavez to resign. A hastily drafted constitutional amendment was pushed through, banning Renteria delegates to the Chavez slate via some dubious petitions.

With that, the insurgents—about 50 of the 300 delegates present—walked out. "Viva Chavez!" the insurgents chanted. Down with the leaders!

Days later, back in Salinas, three men forced Bateman’s nine-year-old son, McLean, to play with his death if his father “didn’t stop complaining.”

Three men, apparently including Chavez, were "fixed" by Chavez by a city official against them. The rape was obvious and elec-
tive, not political. The assault on the union leader was officially deni-ed, and the case is pending. Three days later, La Paz slapped him with a $25 million

The week to point where a lettuce cutter is back in the field. But because they must pay more than their competi-
tors, their advantage is lost to price discrimination. In the eyes of the growers, the UFW has changed the old order.

If the union grows, Bateman predicted, it will force the growers to recognize the workers who fought to build it, and algún día, the people who fought to build it will benefit.

But he said the workers do not know the union. Where people believed in God like we believed in God.

We are very loyal to the people we support. All right, when we got double-cropped, we can be pretty mean.

Not so long ago, Art Torres was the UFW’s fair-haired boy. In 1972, when he was only 28, the union ran him in a state Senate primary against Democrat John De Young, the man who upheld Chavez with a weak stand on a picket line in Salinas. After Torres lost, he lobbied for the UFW in Sacramento. In 1974, with Chavez’s staunch support, he won an As-

denomination of three workers. Their crime refused to pay their holiday pay which is furnished toward a rail political benefits.

What wrenched the movement’s success was that 500 workers weren’t paying their tithes and dues. As long as the membership was held to a maximum of 50 people, there was no point in fighting the union in arbitration. The. of the three men who ran for the presidency (the complete plans to fight the union in arbitration), the union’s administration paid off Roberto Perez. A second was a close friend of the administra-
tion’s treasurer, Antonio Spin.

It didn’t help, I asked Chavez, that the union was bringing the dissidents.

Chavez responded angrily. "If you put that in your writing, you’ll be making a mistake. If you publish that, you’re going to have problems with us. And we don’t need workers in the union just because they don’t agree.

Then he rolled his eyes and said, "I’m a worker, I do this. I saw it as true, it’s wrong."

Two days later, he was back on the phone with Roberto de la Cruz, the union’s manager for the vegetable division. De la Cruz told me the union had issued two suspension letters to Manuel Pat. The other letter, issued to Perez, the first day, October 19, 36, involved Perez, the same day, and a third one since paid up. The letter listed 102 others.

And the second was sent to you? Let’s see, said de la Cruz. It was hand-delivered November 17—our first one after my first conversation on the subject of Chavez.

But the groove is laugh a lot. Not just more than one 2000 jobs in the Salinas Valley, they are still out of business, out of work. Our lettuce has been off or cutting workers back to 20 hours

It was the other around. Chavez would explain. "Art was with us 100 per cent. At our first. Our organizing card was that Art didn’t keep his commitment to us..."

Chavez goes on with no way that we could the UFW support such a man! How would you like that? Art Torres. Torres.

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Cesar Chavez (left) with his cousin, Manuel Chavez

The seeds were sown contracts for our farm workers, and each contract was drawn up with La

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dressed the dream of every Grand Dragon and Impre-
On election day, 500 UFW workers were booted into Los Angeles to get out the vote. Rarely have so many done so much for so little. Three, declaring "a new generation of leadership," won with 24 per cent. So did Gloria Molina, a former Three aide who overcame Chavez's opposition to become the first Latino woman in the Assembly. So did Larry Glassman, another Three aide who won a seat on the L.A. school board—again, defeating the UFW candidate.

Three says he's "not a useful person," but he doesn't appear ready to kick and make up. The Garci campaign, he said, "reflected the intensity of the late-October Cuban violence [Havana] had for me. I knew they were behind it."

All told, the UFW spent $100,000 in the 1982 elections, including $50,000 to Willie Brown, of all people. The total placed it second among the state's special interest groups—just behind the doctors, but well ahead of the retailers, lawyers, bankers, and insurance lobbyists. It spent more, in fact, than the state's AFL-CIO political action committee.

The same might have supported 75 full-time organizers or a full-service farm worker clinic for a year. Instead, it served mainly to dissolve the union's trust. If Art Torres could take Garci's worst punch, why should a liberal Angol worry about the union? Chavez was exiled as an emperor with no urban retainers—and 90 per cent of Chicanos live in the cities. It wasn't so surprising, then, when the state senate voted last February to confirm a bitter Chavez appointee as general counsel in the ALRB: David Turner, the former UFW lawyer who hardly got under the agency's skin. It now takes the ALRB an average of 140 days to decide a case. Bill Westgate, a former fast-food worker and UFW organizer, died of cancer before the ALRB could rule on his unfair labor practice; 348 days to resolve a contested representation election. And even when the UFW wins at the polls, it finds growers in no hurry to bargain.

Alex Garci heads for oblivion, until picked by Chavez

Without the leverage of a strike or boycott, it can take up to six years to negotiate a single contract. By that time a grocer has won by default. His workers are too cynical to care.

"I don't think I'll vote for the union anymore," said Esperanza, a picker at the Calais, a union-certified ranch with no contract since last summer. "It's just a lot of talk."

Cesar Chavez has been arrested more than 50 times. He's been threatened with assassination, seen his office firebombed and his oldest son shot at.

And still he clocks 50,000 miles each year in search of the lost cause, and each year he gains more elusive. As he struggles his stamina for the future, even a mortal blow could get to get more blood, you know, like any organization," noted Stephen Roberson, a Florida organizer who said he resigned after the union dis­ courage new contracts. "If you stop organizing, you're going to shrink." To those, the fall was inevitable—a failure of insufficient militance. The problem was there from the very beginning," said Epiphanio Camacho, the old rose-grower who's now organizing a Community-led farm workers union with the Progressive Labor Party. "In 1965 the strike was very strong. But since the union was picketed, the growers had advantage and brought in scabs from Arizona—legal residents—to break the strike."

Oliva says Chavez was a victim of his own mythology. It's one thing to be the living legend of a young, romantic movement. But if victory isn't quick, and the legend isn't maintained, you're got big problems. He can't risk being wrong, because everyone's watching. It can't be debated, only blasphemed. It's a rock-heavy burden, and Chavez was never equipped to handle it. "Gandhi was a big influence on him, and Gandhi was always picking," said one who knows Chavez well. "I think Cesar ever was really fearful of that way. He was never able to quite measure up. I have been always a little bit afraid." In the main, however, it's hard to find insiders who will publicly criticize Chavez. They aren't about to join the enemy list, but it's more than fear that's keeping them silent. For those who fought with or near Chavez, there's an abiding loyalty, not merely to the union but to the man himself, to a time when they felt most vital and optimistic—when they were like water running downhill.

"The union took a community that was overburdened, underpaid, and underworked," said Alberto Salcedo, director of the California Rural Legal Assistance, a long-time UFW ally. "It made them understand how they were being exploited, and how to use the power of their being to improve their conditions. That was an incredible feat."

"Chavez has made some real damn mistakes and bad judgments," added旭 Kitzer, who'd helped midway the infant UFW despite the indifference of George Meany. "So did Reuther and Meany. I'll defend if I'm going to single out Chave-

zs. He did what no one else could ever do."

But while most farm workers are surely better off than they were 20 years ago, they have little to celebrate. With an average income of $4,000, they're as far as ever from the good life. The men still pull plows in Devil's Canyon while the horses break for lunch. The women with arms still fast in the swamps of Salinas broccoli. The aged still get paid off for picking too slow in pesticide-laced strawberry fields. And when the land is in a Delano labor camp, where conditions have a way of being changed at a moment's notice. There were no speeches, no press releases, no tear gas. Distrust that was full of patriotism at the Forty Acres. But she was assured by her people just the same.

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