

On Pilgrimage - June 1969

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The Catholic Worker, June 1969, pp. 1,5,7

Summary: Detailed account of the strike of the United Farm Workers in California (Coachella Valley, Delano) led by Cesar Chavez and her visit to the West Coast. Reports on the strike movement and details the current strike climate and actions being taken. The strikers demands are explained and she calls on the readership to support the strikers in their fight. Keywords: non-violence, grape boycott (DDLW #899).

My shoes are covered with dust and I am down at the heels indeed, what with tramping through the dust of the Hutterite colonies in South Dakota and Montana, the Indian camps on the Nisqually River, southwest of Tacoma, Washington, and now the Forty Acres of the Farm Workers' Union, which is the pride and joy of Cesar Chavez's heart. Cesar Chavez is the head of the farm workers, more properly called the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (U.F.W.O.C.-AFL-CIO) since the strike began in 1965. It is going on right now in the Coachella Valley in California, an organizing drive which has gone into Texas, Arizona, New Jersey, New York and many States in between.

When my bus arrived at Delano, which is about three hours northeast of Los Angeles, I was met by Father Ed Fronske, one of the young priests from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. He drove me to the half dozen small houses rented by the union to house the offices of organizers, strikers, credit union, etc. These were not the homes of the organizers and union workers, which are scattered around Delano. The three-room building I was taken to has one bedroom, where Cesar spends many hours a day flat on his back. When visitors arrive he comes out into the main office, where a Chilean volunteer sits at a typewriter and a telephone. When I arrived, Cesar's wife Helen was preparing some supper in the kitchen, which was a large enough room to eat in. There was a lovely little flower garden and a picket fence around the house. The first picture I saw when I entered was a blown-up head of Gandhi, (We have one on the wall of St. Joseph's House in New York.) There was****also a picture of Emilio Zapata, the Mexican campesino who spent his life fighting for land for the people who worked, and of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Cesar had visited us in New York at our old place on Chrystie Street and had prayed at our picture of our Lady of Guadalupe as soon as he entered the room and saw it. I had met him also on another occasion when he was in New York

again. He greeted me warmly from his prone position and told me that Ammon Hennacy had been to see him and had given him a copy of his book. "But I already had a copy and had read it," he said. We agreed that Ammon's articles, which we had entitled "Life at Hard Labor," were first rate. He also spoke appreciatively of Joe Geraci's long review in the May issue, of Jerre Mangione's book about Danilo Dolci, *A Passion for Sicilians*.

The things we spoke of that first afternoon were Dolci's work in Sicily (we will have another review of a book by Dolci in a future issue of *Catholic Worker*), of the Hutterite colonies that I had just visited and of Vinoba Bhave of India. It was our discussion of the *moshavim* of Israel, which Cesar said he preferred to the *kibbutzim*, that sparked our visit to the Forty Acres. It made me happy indeed to see that the dreams of the farm workers under his leadership would include the beginnings of another social order, planning for new institutions which could grow up within the shell of the old; cooperative farms, perhaps, which would be village communities surrounded by orchards, vineyards and ranches. Are there any growers with such vision?

Forty Acres

There were evidences of harassment at the Forty Acres, which lie between the town dump and the road. Five hundred shade trees and quick-growing windbreak trees had been planted on the border near the dump and a fire had all but destroyed a score or more of the trees. There were indications, however, that the trees would revive. The long grove has greatly increased in height and thickness in the last two years, though the soil was desert all around us. "Alkaline," one of the drivers commented, kicking at the salt-like surface. "It needs to be washed."

Other trees had been planted, a well had been drilled, there was a water tank, beginnings had been made. Across the road was the great impersonal agency of the Voice of America, which could reach the Far East, Vietnam itself. Down the road there were some friendly neighbors, one of them a house mover. Here too there were new highways cutting through the streets of towns and eliminating the shabby homes of the poor. Two large unpainted buildings had been moved onto the Forty Acres by this same house mover. But the building to which Cesar pointed with pride was an abode headquarters to which visitors in the future would come. This was one of the two buildings that are ambitious indeed in size. Yet one can see that as a national headquarters they will be no more than sufficient to house the business of the union. Cesar mentioned that Jack Cook, who wrote articles about the Texas melon strike a few years ago, and about Delano's grape strike, had painted a good part of one of the buildings. Cesar appreciates a worker-scholar and certainly needs more of them to help with carpentry. Right now all work has ceased, because of the new strike in the Coachella Valley.

It was here at Forty Acres that Cesar conducted his twenty-five-day fast in much the same manner that Danilo Dolci or Gandhi went through their fasts. A man in such a position lives a public life; he must always be available to all who are working with him, a man who gives himself completely to a cause. Another room was used to offer up Masses during the fast. Certainly Chavez relies on the life of the spirit, a life of discipline, in carrying on this tremendous moral struggle with the growers of those rich valleys of California.

Memorial Mass

Next evening there was a memorial Mass at the Filipino Hall for Robert Kennedy. It was the first anniversary of his death, and Chavez will always remember that Kennedy came and broke bread with him as he ended his fast. He considered him a **companero** in a very deep sense. Both Catholics, both devout, it did not seem that the wealth of one made any difference between them.

The Filipinos can be proud of their large hall, where all the strike meetings are being held. Indeed, the strike was started by Larry Itliong, a Filipino, Pete Velasco, another Filipino, was heading the strike down in the Coachello Valley and Julian Balidoy headed the boycott team when they first arrived in New York, in the fall of 1967, and stayed with his four companions at our Kenmare Street apartment.

The Mass was offered by Father David Duran, of Corcoran, California, near a great cotton-growing area. Cesar had asked me to read the epistle which begins: "The life of the just are in the hands of God and the torment of malice shall not touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die but they are at peace."

The memorial eulogy was given by Paul Schrade, regional director of the United Auto Workers, who was the most seriously wounded of the five others who were shot with Robert Kennedy. It took three priests to distribute the communion bread while all sang. De Colores had begun the Mass, O Maria was the communion hymn, and Nosotros Venceremos concluded it.

Bread was distributed after Father Duran had blessed it after the Mass (he is a Mexican and it is a custom) and everyone broke off a piece and passed the bread on to his neighbor. After the Mass there were many introductions and many speeches, what with busloads of the thirty-two labor leaders from all over Canada bringing greetings.

"Taste and see how good the Lord is," and "I am the Bread of Life," were the words on the two long banners which hung on either side of the altar.

Larry Itliong and Cesar Chavez chaired the meeting and Juanita Brown, who, with her husband, heads the worldwide boycott of table grapes, was the interpreter. She is a beautiful young woman with a lively charm.

The best thing about my being called upon to speak at this meeting was that it gave me a view of the packed hall with the beautiful dark faces of the Filipinos

and the Mexicans, men, women and children, the seats all filled, and the aisles and the three sides of the hall also packed in close ranks, no one restless, for four solid hours. They broke out now and then in a crescendo of applause which became faster and faster clapping of hands and a stamping of feet which died down then as suddenly as it had flared up. And of course there were the shouts of **Viva la Causa, Viva la Huelga,** over and over again.

Coachella Valley

The first table grapes ripen in the Coachella Valley, which lies below Indio and just north of the Salton Sea. A desert has been made to bloom by irrigation, and I saw the wonders of the date center of the world with its thousands of palms (one town is called Thousand Palms) not yet ready to be harvested. There are also cotton, asparagus and citrus fruits in this valley, but the harvest at the present time is grapes.

In the date forests, if one can call them that, the workers can be sheltered by shade from the boiling heat, which often goes above 110. The few days that I was there, the Lord seemed to be tempering the wind to the shorn lamb; I did not suffer from the dry heat, and by using a blue bandana as a sunbonnet, I worked under the harsh glare of the sun.

The strike headquarters is a long parish hall, in back of a Seventh Day Adventist church. There were rooms for offices, for a****dining hall and kitchen, and other rooms had been given over for the men and women who were working in the strike. Dolores Huerta was there, with some of her children, and Amalia Uribe is a teen-age Dolores who was active every day in picketing of the ranches, as they call the vineyards here. But most of the pickets were men. Meals were served at the hall, and the Adventists had told the strikers that they could use the little church for religious services. There was a large tree-shaded area in front of the hall, and an outdoor dining area, where people sat around under a shelter. Meetings were held in the evenings out of doors, which made it a little hard to speak. I think that a City College student and I were the only New Yorkers there. But there are of course others in this great struggle who are neither Mexicans nor Filipinos. James Drake, always spoken of as a member of the migrant ministry, is an "Okie," as I was very glad to hear, because it made me realize that he had far more than a "man of the cloth's" realization of the problems involved. He was raised in the Valley and went to school in the small neighboring town of Thermo. His father had been a Methodist minister of a ten-acre farm in Oklahoma and taught school for forty dollars a month as well as serving the church. They managed to live on this salary and the food they raised.

From the beginning Jim Drake has been in the forefront of this strike of agricultural workers, the first in history that has had a grass-roots foundation.

There are two lawyers always on the scene, Jerry Cohen in Delano and David

Averback, from Delano but now staying in Coachella. I had been put up at his house with other women when I arrived and enjoyed his hospitality. He has given not only himself to the strikers, but his house too, with its fine library, comfortable beds and a swimming pool in the back yard where Cesar Chavez comes to exercise. He is under the care of a doctor the Kennedy Family sent him who had taken care of John Kennedy, who also suffered from a back ailment. David is crippled and has to go about on crutches, a big, powerful-looking, handsome man.

I could not help but think as I spent these days in Delano and Coachella that the calmest, most peaceful person in this countrywide struggle is Chavez himself. One of the other leaders told me that he was all but developing ulcers with the tension they were under. But Chavez, though he shows the strain of the long hours of consultation and explanation to visitors of the history of the strike, the philosophy of nonviolence, the history of agriculture itself in the Long Valley, shows no sign of impatience or tension. On one occasion, when he was being questioned by two men of another small group brought from Canada by the growers, perhaps to counteract the great impression made by the formal Canadian delegation, he was asked "Now that you have ruined half the growers in the valley, how long do you think it will take you to ruin the others?" The statement (it could hardly be called a question) was accompanied by such a look of hatred and wrath that it made me realize that the few who took turns in guarding Chavez were indeed needed.

Cesar had already been talking for two hours and got up at this point, begging to be excused with perfect courtesy. "You are not asking honest questions," he said calmly. He has clearly overcome the fear that one almost feels instinctively when faced with such naked hate. Studying Gandhi no doubt helped, and I must remember to report that he expressed gratitude to Eileen Egan for sending him a copy of the Gandhi memorial calendar, put out by the War Resisters League, which I have praised so highly in previous columns.

A Working Day

But to get back in Coachella, I was given hospitality in the four-room house of the Uribe family and when the meeting was over at which I was again asked to speak, Jose Junior drove me to the outskirts of the town to the comfortable little house where I got acquainted with others in the family. Two of the seven brothers were married and had sons, and there were two daughters. The youngest son was going to college and had been exempt from the draft because he had been scarred by allergies to the poison sprays used in the grapes.

I soon learned more about the hard work that had held such a family together. During the strike the picketers were rising at three in the morning so that they could go to the union hall, eat breakfast, and receive their assignments to various fields. Sometimes they had to drive ten miles to a vineyard. It was about five

o'clock when I arrived with Doug Adair and Marshal Ganz, two other "Anglos," as we are called, and Julian Balidoy and others, part of a long caravan of cars. A sheriff was already at the strike hall to direct traffic and drove behind us. I don't know how many sheriffs there were, but I know there were two cars that stayed with us all morning.

Usually the workers are at the job as soon as it is light, pickers, foremen, superintendents, even some of the growers in an emergency such as this. But this morning the workers (scabs) were slow to arrive. Every evening the pickers' camps were visited by strikers who persuaded many to strike, then directed them to other jobs, such as melon picking, which were available at the time. Perhaps this delay in arrivals meant that the visits the night before had borne results.

It was probably near six when the first loads of workers came, a carload of six or seven women who slowed down at the entrance and listened to the strikers for a few moments until a foreman appeared in another car and, leaping out, urged them in. After that the cars came thick and fast, including a busload. Our cars were lined up along the road at various entrances along a half-mile strip, and the two sheriff's cars stayed at our gate because most of the workers seemed to be coming there. They were urged to stop work, to quit, pled with and beseeched, and Amalia's voice through the loudspeaker on one of the cars brought tears to the eyes, so persuasive and so plaintive did she sound. She is only eighteen, is a freshman at the College of the Desert and with her entire family is active in both the strike and boycott.

It was a beautiful morning, and until then the birds had been giving such a paean of praise to their Maker, that I kept thinking of Deane Mowrer and how she would have loved to hear this bird symphony. The sun was already hot and there was no breeze. There was such a dust haze, a heat haze, that one could not see the mountains, which on clear days are not too far away, near Palm Springs, San Gorgonia, still covered with snow, and San Jacinto.

We all carried signs and we did not have to keep moving but stood on either side of the entrance, close enough together so that cars would have to slow down to enter. There was a moment of danger when an enraged foreman, or perhaps a grower, put on a sudden spurt of speed and swerved almost straight at Doug and me, so that we had to leap back. ****

Doug showed the mark of the tires to the sheriff who was taking down the name of one of the strikers who had trespassed into the rows of grapes to talk to a striker. The name of the picker was taken also. The sheriff was perfunctory about both complaints.

But there had been violence. A strike bulletin read: "Antonio Lopez kicked in the ribs and beaten by Irving Felstien, grower; Beatrice Sanchez, had her arm twisted behind her back by Bill Smith; Jose Irube, threatened with a rifle by a grower; Nicholas Buenrostro, cut in the face with grape scissors by unknown person; Armando Sanchez, kicked in the face and body and beaten by a foreman." (The above are only a few incidents of violence.)

“We have to sacrifice to deserve,” the bulletin continued. “The Farm Workers’ Union is built on sacrifice. Farm Workers such as Hope Lopez and Higinio Rangel have fasted for as long as ten days for success of the grape boycott in strange eastern cities.

“The strike and boycott of grapes is a peaceful, non-violent yet direct action to remove oppression and social injustices committed against the farm worker. We call upon all of those working to heed this call for non-violence and leave the grape fields so this non-violent action will be successful.”

One could see that the words, the actions of the strikers were having their effect. Those in the vineyard worked slowly, stood hesitating in the long alley lined with empty boxes. If all the other pickets were making the same impression, there was certainly a slowdown.

I went out one morning at three and the morning before that I had joined the picket line at ten o’clock. I thought of how each day these men and women strikers and non-strikers had to work from daylight until noon, and stopped work only to resume it later on when the heat was not so bad for the grape. I saw men squeezing a grape and testing the running juice for sugar content. The worker himself has to thin the leaves, pick out only perfect bunches, strip off any defective grape before putting it in the paper-lined box to be taken to load on the truck finally and carted to the warehouse. I saw children in the field, helping their parents. Stripping, thinning at \$1.10 an hour, – that was what Jose Uribe’s mother was paid, with a penny extra for each vine thinned. One could only do fifty vines a day, he said, so that made fifty cents a day, and for a six-day week, three dollars extra. But the grower did not pay for the thinning and when Jose and his mother went to collect that extra three dollars, the grower threatened them with a rifle.

Remember these things, you whose mouth water for table grapes; remember the boycott, and help the strikers.

How many things I am leaving out (but I will write more later). I have only now arrived from the West Coast, with this flood of impressions, a bit dazed from sitting up for three nights and two days on Santa Fe and Penn Central. Fare is \$110 by train, and \$158 by plane. We must contribute to the strike fund, and contribute small sacrifices of endurance too. Among us at the Catholic Worker, only Ammon knows such a life at hard labor as these brothers of ours endure.

So this story is written with an appeal to our readers to help these agricultural workers whose struggle has gone on for four years now, from one end of the country to the other. It is the first breakthrough to achieve some measure of justice for these poorest and most beloved of God’s children. Send help to

**United Farm Workers,
Post Office Box 695
Delano, California 93215**

Bulletin

Just as my news story about the new grape strike at Coachella was completed we learn from a June 13th UPI news release in the New York *Times* that ten major Coachella Valley grape growers have asked Federal officials to arrange an immediate meeting with the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee. This is the first major breakthrough in a three-year labor stalemate and undoubtedly comes as a result of the grape boycott, which has been going on all over the country. The growers term the boycott illegal and immoral.

The next day the **Times** printed a slightly longer account. James Drake and Peter Velasco announced that the union's executive board in Delano had voted unanimously to begin the talks. The union said that it was joining the ten growers in asking the Federal Mediation and Conciliation service for a joint meeting. Mr. Drake called for twenty-four-hour negotiations and said that the boycott activity would continue until a settlement was reached.

One union spokesman in Los Angeles said that there was no need of Federal intervention, that with good faith on both sides there could be progress towards a settlement. Nevertheless, the union joined the growers in seeking intervention. A still later dispatch stated that the other growers in the state would *not* negotiate.

The following list of benefits which have been obtained from the nine or ten growers who have already signed contracts with the union was printed on a strike bulletin and passed out to those workers in the fields who had not yet joined the strike. These sad pages show the modesty of demands of the field workers who have been for so many years denied the right to organize into a union. At least thirty strikes in the past forty years have been short-lived failures.

Following are some of the benefits enjoyed by Union members working at those ranches where the UFWOC AFL-CIO has contracts:

WAGES:

General labor.....	1.90
Maintenance men.....	2.20
Irrigator.....	2.10
Truck Driver.....	2.30
Crew Leader.....	2.15
Tractor Driver.....	2.30
Forklift Driver.....	2.30
Working Foreman.....	2.40
Shop Mechanic.....	2.55

The above rates will be increased in the amount of 10c. per hour effective August 1, 1969. Harvest workers will be paid an average hourly rate of \$3.25 per hour.

(Thus, in the 1969 harvest, a worker will average \$3.25 per hour. At no given time will he make less than \$2.00 per hour.)

2. SPECIAL BENEFITS: The grower pays 10c. per hour into a special fund which pays for health insurance for the worker and each member of his family.
3. HOLIDAYS: All employees shall receive eight hours' pay at their straight time hourly rate for Labor Day, Independence Day, Christmas Day.
4. VACATIONS: Workers with 1,600 hours in the last 12 months are granted one week vacation with pay, computed on the basis that 2% of the gross earnings in that 12 months. After 3 years work, the employee receives two weeks paid vacation at 3% of the gross earnings.
5. PENALTY PAY: Employees required to work more than 9 hours a day will be paid 25c. per hour in addition to their regular pay. Employees told to show up for work who are not given work will be paid for four hours at their regular rate of pay.
6. RELIEF PERIODS: Shall be fifteen minutes for each four hours worked.
7. SENIORITY: When filling vacancies the employer will give preference to workers with greatest seniority provided they have the qualifications to perform the work under normal supervision. There will be no discrimination according to race or religion in hiring and determining seniority.
8. HIRING HALL: Employers request workers through the Union hiring hall. The Union shall provide the needed workers within 72 hours. Workers not provided through the hiring hall can be hired directly by the employer.
9. HEALTH AND SAFETY: Adequate toilet facilities, drinking water, first-aid equipment and protective garments are provided. A safety committee made up of union members and management is the watchdog.
10. GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES: No worker can be fired without just cause. If a worker believes he has been fired without cause there are procedures to guarantee his rights.
11. LIFE INSURANCE: If a member whose dues are paid dies, his family receives \$1,000. If any member of the family should die, the family receives \$500.
12. CREDIT UNION: Any member of the Union can borrow up to \$300 from the Union's Credit Union at 1% interest.
13. SERVICE CENTER: The union provides services for all members who are in need of help with income tax, naturalization, welfare or workman's compensation cases, etc.