

Chavez, Workers Step Up Boycott

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Summary: Expresses her joy at the presence of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers union at a rally and fiesta in New York in support of the lettuce boycott. Applauds their non-violent approach and hopes it will be a leaven in the union movement. (DDLW #254).

It was a thrilling sight last month to stand on the steps of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and to see the parade of the United Farm Workers coming up the steps—beautiful, dark, sturdy men, women and children, dressed in those clothes in which they work in the fields, flags flying with the Mexican Indian eagle black against the red of their banners, led by Cesar Chavez and Mrs. Martin Luther King. I had been invited too, but I could not take that long trek from the Riverside Drive Council of Churches headquarters, thru the Columbia University campus, and down to 110th Street where the Cathedral stands, magnificent in its stately grounds, on a height looking East over the City of New York.

I had enjoyed every minute of the evening before—a fiesta held in the hall of the great old Paulist Church, surely one of the biggest in the city, where Marcos Munos (who heads the N.Y. office of the United Farm Workers) had prepared a party to greet the busload and caravan of ten cars which had made its zig-zag way across country from California. It was a pilgrimage to encourage the workers in various cities to continue the boycott of iceberg lettuce.

Fiesta at St. Paul's

The speaking started late, of course, what with undependable cars and bus, but a fiesta meant a feasting, and everyone, hundreds served themselves from the buffet tables. They sang (they had good leaders) and radiated a spirit of joy as they sat on chairs, benches and the floor, keeping a semi-circle in the center of the hall in front of an improvised speaking stand.

Some of the group from the Catholic Worker Farm at Tivoli had driven down in two cars with fifty loaves of homemade bread, and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on First Street baked three ten-pound boneless hams. All the guests had brought food of various kinds. No need to worry about having too much left over because the Farm Workers now have an old brownstone house on West 84th

Street to put up those who come to picket, to help in the campaign to boycott the A&P and other stores where iceberg lettuce is being sold.

Dolores Huerta, one of the vice presidents of the Union, spoke first. She is the mother of eight children who sits with the agribusinessmen, the growers, in conference over contracts for better wages, decent living conditions—all the most elemental needs of man.

The first time I saw one of those huge lettuce fields was when I was visiting Ammon Hennacy outside of Phoenix, Arizona, where he was working nights irrigating. It extended as far as eye could see, and the lettuce had been sold to feed flocks of sheep since “the market price then did not make it profitable to harvest it.” Not far away from Ammon’s shack, there sat a Basque shepherd whom we went to greet. I was happy to see a rosary hanging from a support in his tent. Those farm workers who were greeted with cheers in New York had worked in such fields!

When they marched into the Paulist Church hall the crowded hall resounded with song, especially that triumphant song “We Shall Overcome.” They already have overcome so much in this long continuing struggle for justice.

Dolores spoke, Cesar spoke, and others, but it was briefly. It was a fiesta, after all, and everyone wanted to talk to each other.

Morning Rally

Bishop Paul Moore, Rabbi Robert Marx, Msgr. Charles Diviney, the Vicar General of Brooklyn, and the head of the Catholic Charities in New York, Msgr. James Murray (the latter two representing Cardinal Cooke who was in Australia at the Eucharistic Conference), greeted them next morning at the Episcopalian Cathedral. From the Cathedral pulpit Cesar spoke again and Coretta King, and I also, proud indeed to be representing the poor with Coretta King and Chavez. She had to speak first because she was due in Washington, D.C. to address her own people who were being betrayed by this administration.

I do not remember what I said exactly. I spoke of those first five farm workers, Filipino and Mexican, who came five years ago and stayed with us—“taking on” the City of New York, its markets and chain stores—to urge the grape boycott, truly a David and Goliath situation. And now they all but filled this great cathedral, they and their sympathizers. The glare of the lights used by the television people kept me from seeing this brave audience, but almost facing me, hanging across from me in the sanctuary was a painting on cloth of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas, and of the Mexican farm workers. It had been painted the day before at First Street by Mary Lathrop who had helped Ammon (God rest his soul) start the house of hospitality in Salt Lake City. Such banners have led the farm workers in their long processions and marches. One of the farm workers had taken it from Mary’s hands and hung it up now.

They must also, I told them, be aided by St. Benedict whose motto was “To work is to pray,” and St. Francis, extoller of poverty for love of God and one’s brother.

We too shared a little in that poverty having fasted from grapes and now from iceberg lettuce to assist in the boycott. It was this “little way” which had won the strike against the vineyard owners of California and would win this also.

Cesar’s was a talk delivered simply and clearly, explaining the issues. Not only workers were involved but the public because the insecticides used in the fields which poisoned the men, women and children who worked there, also threatened the health of the public. (It was not many days after his talk that the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture halted and destroyed many thousand crates of lettuce contaminated by an insecticide, the poison of which was closely related to the nervegas manufactured during World War II.)

Cesar spoke of non-violence—how we had to deepen our understanding of Gandhi’s teaching. He spoke with gentleness, with encouragement, to all those who are striving towards a truly human life, without bitterness towards those strangely associated enemies, the growers and the Teamster’s Union which is trying to claim those who work in the fields for their own membership. (Years ago when we had a house of hospitality in Seattle, I remember how confused I was at finding the Teamster’s Union claiming every shop girl, stenographer or waitress for their own membership. Maybe in time of war women drove “teams” or trucks.)

We came away from this gathering with a renewed sense of how this Union of Farm Workers stands closer to an ideal association of men than any other in the history of the American labor movement. Who knows—it may leaven all the rest.

Mine Workers, Farm Workers

When Chuck Smith’s paper **The Green Revolution** first came out, many of our friends said—he’s concentrating on Peter Maurin’s solution, “Back to the Land.” But with the Buffalo Creek disaster, the strip mining in West Virginia and elsewhere, the callous indifference of mine owners to the welfare of those who work under ground and on the ground in villages and farms, plus the profiteering of corrupt union leaders who assassinated those who tried to reform the union, Chuck was plunged into every aspect of the non-violent constructive struggle today. He is a worthy and effective companion to Chavez in this.

Chavez has started clinics, cooperatives, communal groups like the retirement camp for elderly Filipino workers, who by California law had never been allowed to marry here, or bring their families from the Philippines. (They had been considered “colored” like Mexicans, Chinese, Blacks, Puerto Ricans, etc. had been.) Chavez has planted trees on Forty Acres, in Delano. He is interested in the Moshavim of Israel. There is a well-run credit union, headed by Helen Chavez, his wife.

It all goes together—as Eric Gill wrote. So, as an afterthought, I should add that perhaps the United Mine Workers, what with its recent victory in fighting corruption and finding a new President, Arnold Miller, will partake of the spirit of The United Farm Workers. And be a leaven, too.