

of our members when we come around at the beginning of a strike—they're wondering if they will lose their jobs. I wanted to hear what was said, but they put me out. My dad thought I shouldn't be there.

I remember my dad talking later one evening. He was very impressed with the union, and that impressed me. He was saying that the union representative had scolded him for having too large a load on a hand dolly, although, he said, "It's not heavy. I could handle even more than that." He was also impressed by the ten-minute break. He was saying, "It's just fantastic. You get ten minutes twice a day!"

My mom asked, "Well, what do the men do?" and he said, "Oh, just go out and smoke."

"And what do you do?" my mom asked, as my dad didn't smoke.

"Oh, I eat my candy," my dad answered.

We got the same reaction not so long ago at the Schenley workers yard, when we first got our contract. The workers wanted the ten-minute break, but they were amazed by it, even these days, when American workers in other industries just take it for granted.

My dad paid dues to several unions. In fact he was paying dues to our rival union when I started this group. But I know Dad didn't know that much about unions, except that they were good. He joined the Tobacco Workers, the Cannery Workers, the National Farm Labor Union, the Packing House Workers, and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee.

I must have gotten interested in unions through him. I'm sure I didn't get it from my mother. For some reason I read more about unions than I read about other things in the newspapers. I never understood what a strike really was, but I knew when a strike was going on, and I knew about the big fight that Walter Reuther had to get elected in the United Auto Workers and the big campaign for the presidency of the CIO. I'd follow that in the paper every day.

At one time I could name most of the international presidents. I tended to look at unions like small governments in the country. Actually, at the time, I didn't realize I was that interested, but my first friend in Delano, Robert Jiminez, once told me, "Damn it, all you do is read about those damn labor unions." I also remember he told somebody once, "Oh, Cesar, he knows all about the labor unions."

I didn't really. I just knew the names. What I didn't know was anything of the real guts of unions. And I never paid dues to any union.

CHAPTER 9

Pachuco Days

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

When I became a teen-ager I began to rebel about certain things. For example, I rebelled against the home remedies and herbs my mother used. I thought no one knew anything but doctors. And I rebelled against Mexican music. This was the age of the big bands, and I really went for Duke Ellington and Billy Eckstine. We would travel from Delano to Fresno to hear the bands, and in San Jose they had them every week.

I also rebelled against some of the religious customs, like the *promesa* or *manda*, where you ask the favor of a saint and promise to visit the chapel of the saint's church. It wasn't that I was strong in the church's more formal teachings by then, but just that I didn't approve of it.

There were other things, too. When I was younger, I really liked being with older people. But when I became a teen-ager, I got into that trap of thinking they were dull and uninteresting. Nowadays I again find older people very interesting when I have time to listen. They can tell you many important things.

And then I rebelled at the conventional way of dressing. I once said I was a pachuco, and I had a very difficult time explaining it. The pachucos wore their hair long, in a duck-tail cut; they wore pegged pants and long coats, long key chains, and a pegged, broad flat hat. Today what people remember are the pachuco riots in the forties in San Jose, Oakland, and Delano. But those riots were not the same as when the barrios and ghettos exploded in the sixties. The rioters were not Mexican. They were soldiers, marines, and sailors who raided the barrios attacking the pachucos.

I saw clippings of the Los Angeles papers with pictures of pachuco kids with pants torn to the thighs by police. If they had long hair, police clipped them, and if their coats were long, police cut them short. The pachucos would wear shoes with very thick soles, and police would take the soles off. Today police still act pretty much the same way toward nonconformists. They were pachucos then. Now they're hippies.

Not so long ago a Chicano came from Los Angeles to see me. He was full of tattoos. "I want to write something of when you were a pachuco," he said. "We want to make a movie. I want to show how a guy who used to be a pachuco in the streets rose to be a great leader of the barrios."

I looked at him surprised and started to protest.

"Don't worry," he interrupted, "I'm not going to write anything about dope."

He apparently assumed our pachuco days were like his. But all we did was wear some of the pachuco clothes, the pegged pants and the long coat. We didn't affect the key chain, or the hat, or the dope.

We needed a lot of guts to wear those pants, and we had to be rebellious to do it, because the police and a few of the older people would harass us. But then it was the style, and I wasn't going to be a square. All the guys I knew liked that style, and I would have felt pretty stupid walking around dressed differently. At Delano dances, for example, all the squares sat across the room from us, and we had a lot more fun than they did.

My mother wasn't violently opposed to our wearing those clothes, though she and my dad didn't like it much, but little old ladies would be afraid of us. And in Delano there was a whole group in the Mexican-American community who opposed pachuco clothes.

One day I went over to the driver's license department with my chukes on. As I went in, one of two ladies remarked, "I'd never let my son wear those! That monkey suit!"

They were having trouble with their license. So after I got mine, I went over to help them.

"Oh, what are you wearing those pants for?" one asked. "You're so well-mannered!"

"'Cause I like to wear them," I said.

"Yea, but people say . . ."

"I don't care what people say," I said. "You said something about me. I don't care. I'm still helping you." It embarrassed them, but their reaction was typical.

The hard thing, though, was the police. We were so gun shy. For sure the cops would stop you anyplace, any time, and we were prepared for that. But when they stopped us at the theater in Merced, it was humiliating. We were thinking of going to the show, but we weren't sure. We were just looking around to see what was playing. A cop, who was just passing by, saw us and got on his radio. Soon two or three police cars arrived, and the officers lined us up against the wall. It was a bad scene. They made us take our shoes off, they just almost undressed us there. Then they gave us about ten minutes to get out of town.

We were a minority group of a minority group. So, in a way, we were challenging cops by being with two or three friends and dressing sharp. But in those days I was prepared for any sacrifice to be able to dress the way I wanted to dress. I thought it looked sharp and neat, and it was the style.

But our rebellion wasn't the kind of rebellion they have today—students and young people rebelling against society. That's a good thing. Today these kids have an idea. We didn't know exactly what was happening. We were a step behind them. It's all a matter of evolution.

And my children are not inhibited as we were. I saw my daughter Sylvia once seated next to a couple of white girls in high school. When she stood up, they made fun about her being Mexican. She just turned on them and answered back in strong terms. She didn't know I was there.

I remember I couldn't speak when something like that happened to me. I would cry or just walk away. But I remember my daughters Sylvia and Linda standing there with about ten white girls, taking them on for twenty minutes. Not an ounce of inhibition. Finally the other girls walked away. Sylvia was laughing, and she said something in Spanish, clearly making fun of them. We would have never done that. We just could never.

We had never experienced discrimination in Yuma when we lived there, but we encountered White Trade Only signs all over California. In Los Angeles we got off the highway and went to East Los Angeles, while in Delano we'd go to Mexican town. We didn't challenge it. Then in the forties we went back to visit Yuma, and there were those signs all over the place, White Trade Only.

My rebellion as a teen-ager wasn't against that, though. It was against Mexican music, my mother's herbs, and some of her religious ideas. But I didn't say I wasn't a Mexican. I didn't feel I wasn't. In fact I was pretty strong about being Mexican. Then

after I got married, all of a sudden I began to appreciate mariachis and all those other things I was rebelling against. As I look back, I now understand what was happening. Everywhere we went, to school, to church, to the movies, there was this attack on our culture and our language, an attempt to make us conform to the "American way." What a sin!

I don't know why I joined the navy in 1944; I think mostly to get away from farm labor. I was doing sugar beet thinning, the worst kind of backbreaking job, and I remember telling my father, "Dad, I've had it!"

Neither my mother nor my dad wanted me to go, but I joined up anyway. It was wartime. I suppose my views were pretty much the views of most members of a minority group. They really don't want to serve, but they feel this awesome power above them that's forcing them to do it.

I had little choice, either get drafted or sign up. Since I wanted even less to go into the army, I enlisted in the navy when I was still seventeen.

Those two years were the worst of my life: this regimentation, this super authority that somehow somebody has the right to move you around like a piece of equipment. It's worse than being in prison. And there was lots of discrimination. Before the war, the navy had blacks and Filipinos who were given kitchen jobs, but no Mexicans. The only black man I ever saw who was better than a steward was a painter.

The Mexican-Americans were mostly deck hands. That's what I was. Most of my duty was in small boats, while part of it was land-based. I also was on a crew transport which went to the Mariana Islands, but I never was engaged in combat.

The food in the navy was terrible. I noticed that the Anglos would call the food all kinds of dirty names, and then eat it. On the other hand, if Mexicans didn't like the food, they just didn't eat it. I couldn't understand how Anglos could eat stuff they called by such names.

It was while I was in the navy that the theater incident happened in Delano, a story that's been twisted when it's been told before. I was home with a couple of navy guys from Texas on a seventy-two-hour pass, and we weren't in uniform.

For a long time, movie theaters throughout the San Joaquin Valley were segregated. It was just accepted by the Mexicans then. In Delano, the quarter-section on the right was reserved for Mexicans, blacks, and Filipinos, while Anglos and Japanese sat elsewhere. It had been like that since the theater was built, I guess.

This time something told me that I shouldn't accept such discrimination. It wasn't a question of sitting elsewhere because it was more comfortable. It was just a question that I wanted a free choice of where I wanted to be. I decided to challenge the rule, even though I was very frightened. Instead of sitting on the right, I sat down on the left.

When I was asked to move to the other section, I refused, and the police took me to jail. They didn't book me; they kept me there about an hour. The desk sergeant didn't know with what to charge me. He made a couple of calls. I would guess he called the chief of police and the judge because that's a natural thing to do.

The first call I think was to the chief. I don't know what was said, but the chief probably said, "What about drunk?" because the sergeant said, "Well, he's not drunk," and then he said, "Well, he wasn't really disturbing the peace." Then I suppose he called a judge or the city attorney. Finally the sergeant gave me a lecture and let me go. He tried to scare me about putting me in jail for life, the typical intimidation they use.

I was angry at what happened, but I didn't know then how to proceed. It was the first time I had challenged rules so brazenly, but in our own way my family had been challenging the growers for some time. That was part of life.

That same day I found a house in a place called El Rio, about six miles from Oxnard. Then I set up a house meeting that same evening and didn't get back to Carpinteria before 1:00 in the morning. I went to sleep, got up about 8:00, had breakfast, played with the kids for about a half hour so it wouldn't be so obvious, then took off again.

We were going to stay at the beach seven or eight days, but after six we went back to San Jose, loaded up our stuff in a rented trailer, and came right back.

HELEN CHAVEZ RECALLS

When we packed up in San Jose, we were so busy we forgot to go to the bank and get any money. The night before, Cesar had gotten sick and was just burning up with fever. I said, "Let's wait." But we had everything packed, and he had a house meeting that evening. He said, "No, we have to go."

I don't drive, so he had to. Here we get into our beat-up station wagon loaded with this huge rented trailer with all our belongings in it and the kids, and I just had maybe a few dollars.

We had to stop along the way because he was really burning up with fever, and I got a little something for the kids. Then the car stopped completely. We really didn't know what to do. Somebody stopped and helped us, so we gave them our last two dollars. The kids were hungry, but we didn't have any money to buy any food for them.

Finally after that long trip, stopping all along the way, we got to El Rio. There was this little grocery store, and I told Cesar, "Go ask them if they'll cash a check for us because the kids haven't eaten since this morning."

Well, he said, "No, you go," and I said, "No, you go." Finally he said he would, and he got some milk and stuff.

We went up to the little house we had rented, but it was dark, and there was no electricity. I think we had a flashlight. We just threw a few mattresses on the floor so the kids could sleep. I fed them and put them to bed.

Cesar went up to this meeting, sick as he was.

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

Oxnard was probably my worst project of all. Not even the Union has harassed me as much as that one. It started in August of 1958 and lasted through 1959.

The first thing I did was to start house meetings. Then we started a voter registration drive, because the November election was coming up and there was a good Democrat running there against Congressman Charles M. Teague. I began to sign up people for citizenship classes and opened a little office about the third day I was there to service the people.

When I went to Oxnard, I was sure that the biggest issue would be a railroad crossing, because when I was in school, a lot of Mexicans got killed by the train. I remember a school friend of ours got killed, and it stuck with me. I thought this would be a very sensitive issue, but when I mentioned it, people weren't aroused. Instead they began to come at me with the bracero issue. That was an issue that I didn't even suspect.

Braceros are Mexican farm workers who were imported under a federal law passed during the war. Although Ventura is a small county, at one time it had more braceros and more bracero labor camps than any other county in the United States. The biggest bracero camp in the country was in Oxnard, a complex of camps which housed about twenty-eight thousand workers.

At the first house meeting, I went through the whole spiel, then a man got up and mentioned the braceros. By that time I had developed some skill about listening to the issues that people presented. I had learned that people don't come to you with an issue in black and white. Sometimes something hurts them, but they don't know exactly what it is. But in this case it was very clear. He said, "Why is it we can't get any jobs? The braceros have all our jobs. What are you going to do about that?"

At every house meeting, they hit me with the bracero problem, but I would dodge it. I just didn't fathom how big that problem was. I would say, "Well, you know, we really can't do anything about that, but it's a bad problem. Something should be done."

Finally I decided this was the issue I had to tackle. The fact that braceros also were farm workers didn't bother me. There's an old dicho, no puede dejar Dios por Dios—you can't exchange one god for another. This was a question of justice, and I've never had any problem making a decision like that.

The jobs belonged to local workers. The braceros were brought only for exploitation. They were just instruments for the growers. Braceros didn't make any money, and they were exploited viciously, forced to work under conditions the local people wouldn't tolerate. If the braceros spoke up, if they made the minimal complaints, they'd be shipped back to Mexico.

We always felt that ending the program would be the best thing we could do for them and for everybody. So I changed the

attack at house meetings to the issue of fighting to get those jobs from the braceros. There was instant reaction.

I studied the issue and learned that, according to the law, braceros could not be used if there was local labor available. But they were being used, and the people could not get jobs. So I decided to find out how the system worked. For the first couple of weeks I'd get up early in the morning, apply for work, and make notes.

When I applied for work at the bracero camp, they would tell me to register at the Farm Placement Service, which was in Ventura, about eight miles from Oxnard. The office opened at 8:00 A.M., and by the time I went there and back, it was almost 9:00. But the bracero camps opened at 4:00 and started dispatching people at 4:30. By 6:00, everybody had been dispatched.

The guy would tell me, "I'm sorry I can't take you because people are gone already. They've been dispatched." So I came back the following morning at 4:00 or 5:00 and the guy told me, "I'm sorry. I can't send you because this referral slip you have from the Farm Placement Office is outdated. It's yesterday's."

That was the gimmick. The whole system was rotten. The Farm Placement Service was in cahoots with the federal government, which was in cahoots with the growers to keep the local workers out of jobs, get all of the braceros in, and then exploit the braceros.

Not only did they pay braceros cheap wages, about seventy-five cents an hour, but they brought in three times as many as they needed and worked them every third day. Since all of the braceros had to pay board, whether they were working or not, and pay insurance and buy cigarettes and other things, whether they were working or not, some people became millionaires just from providing food or insurance or other things for them. But the braceros were poor when they came, and were poor when they went back. It was a vicious racket of the grossest order.

After each refusal I'd go to the CSO office, sit down and type the whole report, just a little story. Then I'd file it. I got a hunch if we used their own medicine and turned it into poison, we might be able to get them.

Meanwhile, I continued to hold house meetings, postponing the first general meeting until I had touched every family there. I wanted to build the chapter really solid. By the time we had our first general meeting, about six hundred came. From then on we held those meetings twice a month for thirteen months, and we never had fewer than four hundred, and several times we had over a thousand.

It was something like Delano later during the grape strike, people coming out of the walls. We had an eleven- or twelve-point program. But the difference between that CSO chapter and any other CSO up to that point was that jobs were the main issue. And I began to see the potential of organizing the Union.

CHAPTER 7

Getting the Proof

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

On January 13, the *Oxnard Press-Courier* announced that Edward Hayes, the head of the Farm Placement Service, was going to install the new executive board of the Ventura County Farm Labor Association two days later. The association was made up of growers who used the braceros.

Hayes was a very powerful figure, a man who could keep thousands of people from getting jobs. It's amazing how you can hate a guy, but before I was through in Oxnard, that was one guy I hated.

We called a big meeting in the park for that night, and about one thousand and five hundred came. We had a radio announcer, an officer of the CSO who had a Spanish-language radio program, covering the Hayes banquet. At 6:00 he told me he thought Hayes was going to be talking about 8:30, so at 6:00 sharp we had maybe one hundred people distribute a leaflet all over Oxnard, in the Chicano barrio, the Anglo barrio, and even in the bracero camps. It took us about one and a half hours.

The banquet was held in the dining hall of the Buena Vista bracero camp. They got all the braceros out, of course, and the braceros were looking through the windows as steaks and drinks were served to the growers. Never before in the history of the camp had steaks and drinks been served. Earlier, while the dinner was being prepared, there was a grease fire that caused three thousand dollars damage. The frosting on a special cake cooked for Hayes was ruined.

Hayes was halfway through his speech when someone showed him our leaflet accusing him of being in collusion with the employers. I'll never forget. He said, "That was a dastardly act!" We demanded that he come to our meeting that night, but he didn't accept the challenge.

The next morning we started hitting the governor's office, raising hell, and they wouldn't talk to us. So I called Alan Cranston, who by this time was state controller. He called the governor's office, and they had John Carr call back. Governor Pat Brown had just taken office and had appointed Carr as director of the Department of Employment, the department in charge of the Farm Placement Service. Carr referred me to somebody. Then I called Carr every day for about a month before I got through to him again.

Meanwhile, I tried to take others with me every day when I went to apply for work at the Farm Placement Service. I begged them to go, but they wouldn't. There was a seventeen-year-old kid named Chavira, a short, handsome kid with black wavy hair—he was my first follower, I guess—and he agreed to go, just as a joke. We went, and we developed a little ritual going into the office.

The farm placement office was at the back of this large building where the Department of Employment was housed. At the back of the employment office was a little corridor where there was one desk. The guy behind the desk was going to sleep—no one had seen him in I don't know how many years. So we went and applied for work.

It took us one and a half hours to get through the application, there were so many questions. They wanted the last time we worked, where we worked, everything. I gave them all they wanted and more. I would fill out two forms, one for them and one for me. After they were filled out, the man gave us referral cards to a grower.

Little by little a few more guys joined me. And after we had gone about four or five times, I had a chance to explain how the plan was working, and how I thought it could be handled. Then it began to work. The numbers who came to the office grew.

I started making it into a sort of game. I'd say, "Let's go to the Farm Placement Service," and we'd start laughing. "We know it's not going to work, but let's go just for the ride. You don't have anything to lose. Let's go." Well, the guys weren't working, so why not?

It started as a game, but after a while it was no longer a game,

it was a very serious thing. We would march in, single file, me in front wearing my navy peacoat. At first there were two or three, then four and five, then eight and ten. It kept increasing. Once we got to about twenty, we'd walk in at 8:00 sharp every morning.

We had to march through the entire office and then along one of the walls to the back. The ladies working there, the moment they saw us coming, turned around to look at us. It was a very funny scene as we were playing the game. I didn't care about the women; I was trying to get work for the guys, and, to get them to come, day in and day out, they had to get a kick out of it. It just couldn't be done at that time on the basis of their going to get jobs right then. They just couldn't.

We'd stay there all morning filling out forms, then we'd take time out to eat at 12:00, and sometimes we'd be there until 3:00. We filled out everything they wanted, employment records going back twenty years. I had to fill most of them out in the beginning. Then I began training others to do it. We made two copies, one for them, one for us. The whole idea was, let's use the system and let's make it work against them by documenting cases as they'd never been documented before.

A lot of do-gooder groups that were trying to do something about this bracero program never had evidence of the law violations. They knew what the problem was, talked about it, but they couldn't produce the bodies. I set off to have the evidence, and have it in such overwhelming numbers it couldn't be refuted.

One day, after about a month of trying, I finally talked to Carr again in Sacramento. "I don't believe it," he said, "I want to come out." That's what I wanted. He drove his car down privately, very quietly, and I took him around and showed him everything. Then he said, "It's unbelievable, let's go to work. I want evidence. I don't want just complaints."

Carr, of course, was afraid to move right away. There was tremendous political pressure. Governor Brown also was very frightened. He never did anything on the braceros. He was chicken on it all the way through.

I went to Santa Barbara and met with the Bureau of Employment Security, which was under the Federal Department of Labor. That department, together with the State Farm Placement Service, ran the program. What they would do was pass the buck from one to the other.

We brought the Southern California director of the Farm Placement Service, William Cunningham, to Oxnard for a meeting at the Juanita School, together with the local official in Ven-

tura and a man from the Bureau of Employment Security. The people got so mad they threw them out. Cunningham spoke for about fifteen minutes, about the law giving the workers the right to jobs. He said, "You say there's abuses in the bracero program. Prove it. Anybody can get a job. You want a job? We'll give you a job!"

We opened the floor for questions. It wasn't questions, it was an attack. They stormed him. "Fink! We want jobs!" The people just lashed them. The three ran out of the meeting, visibly shaken.

But the following day we got three guys hired by Japanese-American growers. One worked an hour, then was fired because they said he couldn't do the job even though he had worked cutting celery for seven or eight years. Another got a job irrigating. He'd been irrigating for seventeen years. He was fired after three hours because they said he didn't know how to irrigate. And the guy who lasted the longest lasted about five hours driving a tractor.

So then I called for an investigation. Right away the federal government came, and I gave them five referral cards, only five, because I wanted to see how they were going to play them. I took five that I thought represented some of the most obvious cases.

Then we increased the pressure. We'd go over to the bracero camps and picket at night, then after work just shout at the people who administered the program, "We want jobs!" for a half hour and drive them nuts. We had kids distribute leaflets in the stores saying, "Dear Mr. Merchant, the reason we don't buy here is because the growers won't let us work. They have braceros working, and they take all the money to Mexico."

We also drafted fourteen demands, and out of the fourteen points we got twelve. So I sent a letter to Carr asking for the other two. He answered something like, "What the hell do you want? Blood?"

In answer to one of our demands—and because of pressure from CSO members, other CSO chapters, and supporters—the Farm Placement Service opened an office in a trailer near Oxnard right across the street from the cemetery. Soon after that, the city kicked us out of the city park office which they had let us use.

We rented a little store which we jammed with rummage, and I had my little office in the back. The place was open from 5:00 in the morning until after 10:00 at night seven days a week, and the rummage helped pay for the rent.

Of course, I worked all during the hours the store was open and even longer. At the most I was making eighty dollars a week

plus some gas money. It was certainly a far cry from the recent antipoverty programs.

Talk about working on a shoestring. We ran that office, including the telephone, on no more than twenty or thirty dollars a month. I had one man helping me, and the rest were volunteers. That's where the poverty programs failed. They existed because they had money. We had to exist because there was a need, in spite of a lack of money.

Poverty programs didn't organize people the way we did. Their work was superficial. We were gut organizers. We had to organize to exist. We didn't have conferences or seminars, our classes and conferences and seminars were out in the streets and with the people in their homes. And we were completely free. Nobody questioned what we did.

Sometimes today I wonder how we ever did all that we did in Oxnard, because our fight for jobs was only part of the program. Of the other fights, one of the most dramatic was urban renewal—we once got five hundred at a city council meeting to protest an urban renewal project—but there were other fights, like getting deputy registrars, fighting the welfare department, and conducting citizenship classes.

Thirteen hundred people came to class, and we had one class where over seven hundred became citizens in one day. We were holding the classes in schools, homes, on street corners. At night the Ramona School classes were full. Where the kids sat during the day, the parents would sit at night, and we not only taught them the Constitution and basic English, but we also taught them to fill out all the citizenship forms.

After a while in the job drive, we would meet at the CSO office and have coffee and Mexican bread before we went to the employment office. There, the people working started getting worried. They were very nice. They smiled, said, "How are you?" They shook hands before we filled out the forms, but they were very nervous.

By the time we had been doing this a month, we had anywhere from one hundred to two hundred coming in every day. We'd form them single file, and I would shout "March!" and we'd march in. They had to bring in guys from all over the state to take care of us.

We had people referred to all the ranches, so we had something on each of the growers. And, in spite of all that activity, it took us forty-one days before we got one worker placed.

The authorities didn't know it, but I had nineteen hundred

signed affidavits by then, all notarized. Maybe altogether I had fourteen hundred people involved, but some guys had about ten different complaints. We had a guy that came to the Farm Placement Service for something like eighty-five days and couldn't get a job. And we had the referral cards to prove it.

CHAPTER 8

A Victory That Failed

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

One day in April we staged a sit-in at the Jones ranch where twenty-seven braceros were pulling tomato seedlings. It's stoop labor, taking out seedlings from the ground and packing them in little boxes for transplanting in Sacramento and elsewhere.

I went in wearing an old hat and sunglasses and stationed a man opposite each bracero, just facing them sitting down. The braceros were frightened, so they didn't move.

As the foreman didn't know who I was, although he did know my name, my instructions were, "Whatever you do, don't call me by my name." I had left a woman from the Packinghouse Workers outside the field with simple instructions. If any trouble came, I had told her, take my car and go directly to the phone to call Eddy Flores, a farm worker and one of the active leaders, who later became head of the Construction Workers local in Ventura. As a signal, I was going to get out my white handkerchief and wave it if we got arrested.

No sooner were we in the field than the cops arrived, the highway patrol and the sheriff's deputies. They were looking for a leader, but no one was saying anything. Then the lady from the Packinghouse Workers came, with her high heels and her fifty-dollar dress, going through the mud calling, "Cesar, Cesar, I got to tell you something!" I was arrested and so were the others.

But someone called John Carr before they took us in, and the farm placement office radioed the sheriff not to arrest us, that this was something the growers had to work out themselves. Then

the federal official arrived and told the grower, "I want these men hired right now. Take those braceros back to the camp!"

We got twenty-seven people working from about 11:00 to about 1:00. They were fired at 4:00, and the next morning the braceros were back at work again. We called Sacramento, got the braceros out again, and our people in. But they started firing them one by one, finding all kinds of excuses, firing them and black-listing them.

After several days, one of the men in the Bureau of Employment Security called me to his room about midnight.

"Cesar, I'm with you," he said. "I think what you're doing is a damn good thing. I want to help." Then he said, "Look, I've got eighteen years in the service. If they find out what I'm doing, I'm going to lose my job. It's up to you. If I can trust you, I'll tell you some things."

I said, "Sure." In fact, I've never mentioned his name.

He told me, "You know, these people don't want any investigations. They don't want anything public because this thing is a time bomb. They don't want any publicity on it, and you've got everybody shook up."

I didn't realize the magnitude of the situation, so I thanked him. I thought, if they don't want any publicity, fine. I knew what to do.

The following morning we marched—about sixty or seventy of us—to the employment office trailer. They registered about eight times each because we wanted to get a lot of cards. We registered until the guy ran out of cards and went to Ventura to get more. Before we were through, we had piles of cards, everybody had eight, ten, twelve, or fifteen referral cards. At lunchtime we sent somebody to the store to bring sodas and food to make sandwiches.

Later that afternoon we gathered more people and started marching from the trailer to the Jones ranch. Besides the people marching, there were maybe forty or fifty cars with mothers and kids, and those that couldn't march.

By that time there were all kinds of cops and TV cameras and newspaper people I had told we were coming. I was marching about the middle of the march. The press wanted to know, "What are you going to do when you get there? Are you going to get into the field?"

I said, "We can't tell you yet. You have to stick around."

When we got up to the gate of the Jones ranch, there was one guy who wanted us to go in, to trespass.

I said no.

"Yeah, we have to trespass. We have to show these guys!" He got up on a car and made a speech.

So I got on another car and said, "I'm not going. If you go, I'm not responsible for what happens."

No one moved, not a single soul. He was by himself. Some people told him, "You go," but he looked around and saw nobody was with him. He didn't go.

Then we got them around the car I was on, and I made a speech. We took a vote not to ever again register to work because registration was a gimmick to keep us from getting jobs.

I burned my referral card, another joined, then another and another and another. Pretty soon everybody joined in. We put them in a big pile and set them on fire. The TV cameras just ate it up.

That night I sent a letter to the local farm placement office and to the state saying, no more registration. And we give you seventy-two hours to give us jobs.

Nothing happened.

A month later, when Secretary of Labor James Mitchell was scheduled to come to Ventura, we decided to picket him. His advance man begged me not to, but I said, "Nothing doing unless we get jobs right now." Since his advance man could not provide jobs, we had about one thousand people picketing the Oxnard airport. Secretary Mitchell landed there, saw all the people, and quickly drove to the Lions Club in Ventura. We followed and picketed him there.

The pickets were yelling, "We want jobs!" We really put on the heat and forced him to have a meeting with us at the Pierpont Inn. I didn't go because I first wanted him to meet some conditions, and he refused. So he met with the Packinghouse Workers representatives.

Later we had a march in town at night with candles. We were at a deadend, and we were just unloading all the pressure on them. It started at one of our regular meetings. I said, "We're not going to meet tonight, we're just going to go into the streets with signs telling people we want jobs." During the day I had had people making signs, so we just picked them up and started marching.

One of our ladies asked, "Can I bring my banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe?" and I said, "Yeah, sure. Bring her." So I set her marching in front. That's where I got the idea that we needed some flag to identify us.

When we went out into the street, instant success! People

parked their cars, women got out, and they started marching. Then we started singing Mexican hymns.

The cops came out right away. They tried to stop us. I said, "You can't stop us!"

"Well, you can't have a parade."

"I don't care."

They said they were going to take me to jail, and I said, "Okay." The people said, "If you take him, then we all go." They meant it.

They didn't take me. Instead, we marched for about two hours, and the cops provided an escort.

That's when I discovered the power of the march. We started with a couple of hundred people in La Colonia, and by the time we got through, we must have had ten thousand people. Everybody was in it. Among Mexicans a march has a very special attraction. It appeals to them—just like a pilgrimage. I had been thinking of a march before that, from Calexico to Sacramento for the old-age pension—I guess for the same reason that marches attract Mexicans, and maybe that attraction was in me—but I had not gone through with that.

Meanwhile, there were more investigations. One day, when Edward Hayes finally came back to Oxnard, I took ten referral cards and threw them on the table. "I want resolutions for these cards. I want answers!" I wanted him to take corrective action and get jobs for these guys.

He looked and started sweating. The most they'd ever received in a three-month period was eight complaints. "There are a lot of complaints here," he protested, and more to that effect. So I gave him sixty more. I was just playing a game with him. He didn't know what to do. Finally he brought people in from different offices, and they set up shop, rented an office at the Packinghouse Workers Union office.

I kept Carr informed of everything I gave Hayes, the time I gave it to him, and his responses. Then I pressed and pressed Hayes. After about three weeks of handling those seventy cards—he still couldn't come up with answers—I dumped another hundred on him.

The head of the federal section from Santa Ana came over, and I told him, "I have a whole stack of cards, and I've got three times more than this. I want a written report on every one." If I had had a legal department as I have now, it would have been beautiful. We didn't have that. I did it without going to the courts or anything.

So then they really started jumping.

Carr also was pushing Hayes and talking to me and saying, "Don't give up. If he doesn't give it to you, you call me." We turned the heat on, we squeezed him, and we got him.

Our biggest break came when we got the growers to agree to hire people at our office. That was the most beautiful victory. We forced the growers' association to come and pick our people up right in front of our office. We became a hiring hall. We had them!

The whole struggle was a thirteen-month fight. I was the only paid organizer, but we had every farm worker family in Oxnard tied into the operation.

People would come and tell us they needed work as irrigators or tractor drivers or in the sheds. I said, "You want to drive a tractor? Okay. You go find me a bracero on a tractor, and you've got a job." That worked like magic. People were going all over the valley.

When they found a bracero, we'd call the federal people and say, we want this job right on the spot.

Then we began to get growers we didn't even know who would call the office for workers. They were paying 65 cents an hour when I went there, and we got the rate up to 90 cents. The grower would call and say, "I need four men," and I'd say, "How much do you pay?"

"Well, whatever the going rate is. I guess seventy-five cents."

"Nothing doing. You want men from this organization, you pay ninety cents."

"Okay. Fine."

There were so many people waiting for jobs in front of our CSO office, they had to block off the street.

Then the police came, brought in six or seven squad cars, and forced the people off the street onto the sidewalk. Then they blocked the streets entirely, so the growers' trucks couldn't come in.

We had to demonstrate against the police. We marched down Main Street, went to the police department, and sat in the station waiting room until the police agreed to reopen the street.

As a result of all the heat, William Cunningham, the Southern California director of the Farm Placement Service, was accused of taking bribes and was canned, only weeks before he was due to retire. He lost his seniority and his pension. Then Hayes also was forced out as head of the Farm Placement Service; because of his

ties to the growers, he quickly got a job working for the growers' association in the Imperial Valley. Several others in the Farm Placement Service also lost their jobs. The whole operation was rotten.

We had won a victory, but I didn't realize how short-lived it would be. We could have built a union there, but the CSO wouldn't approve. In fact, the whole project soon fell apart. I wanted to go for a strike and get some contracts, but the CSO wouldn't let me. National headquarters got calls from labor, and the CSO board got frightened. So the CSO president came to try to stop me.

I got angry and told him, "You don't stop me, I quit!" Then I went inside the house and wouldn't let him in.

He stayed there about two hours. Finally he convinced me, and I relented. Not long afterward I was appointed national director of CSO and transferred to Los Angeles.

By the time it was over I was down from 152 to 127 pounds and was averaging about four hours' sleep a night. Not only that, but I nearly lost my youngest son, Birdy, who was born that August.

He got diarrhea when he was about two weeks old, and I was too busy to take him to the doctor. Finally Helen walked with him to an osteopath, who misread the symptoms. She took him home and called me. She was crying. Then I realized how worried she was, and we rushed him to the hospital where the doctors said he wasn't going to live.

In desperation I said, "Doctor, how about getting someone to consult with you."

The doctor got a pediatrician from Ventura who diagnosed the problem and was able to stop the diarrhea. Birdy was saved.

When I left Oxnard, two guys were hired as organizers. But soon after I left, a factional fight started which destroyed the effectiveness of that CSO chapter. We also left the operation to the Packinghouse Workers Union, and in ninety days she blew. In ninety days the whole thing was lost. Talk about factions—there must have been as many factions as there were workers.

When I came back to Oxnard about five or six months later, the guys were out of jobs, and the braceros were all back at work. I came in the morning and talked to a group of workers who had started a little fire by the railroad tracks. They told me, "Oh, it sure went. It's very bad."

I didn't say anything, I was so mad—I don't know at whom,

at the leadership and at the people for not fighting for what I was sure was there. And I thought of all the time and energy that I had put in.

If I had had the support of CSO, I would have built a union there. If anyone from labor had come, we would have had a union. I think if the Union of Organized Devils of America had come, I would have joined them, I was so frustrated.

But then, maybe I wasn't ready. If I had been, I would have done it even though CSO was against it.

CHAPTER 9

"I Resign"

CESAR CHAVEZ RECALLS

I stayed in CSO as director a couple more years, hoping I could persuade the board to organize farm workers. I thought of doing it alone, but I was discouraged by some friends, mostly some of the priests I worked with. They said I couldn't start a union without the help of the AFL-CIO. "That's the only way it's going to be done," they said.

They had good hearts and a lot of interest and gave a lot of themselves, but I didn't know that they knew less about it than I did. When I met with the priests and Dolores, only Dolores encouraged me.

DOLORES HUERTA RECALLS

It was *Father Thomas McCullough* and *Father Donald McDonnell* who went back East to talk to *Walter Reuther* and *George Meany* about putting money into organizing farm workers. But when they were unsuccessful, *Father McCullough* said, "Let's start our own group and call it the *Agricultural Workers Association*."

I made my husband *Ventura* quit his job to work for AWA. Then my brother quit his job, and both worked full time without pay to organize the union. But *Father McCullough* didn't want me to be involved. He said that farm labor organizing was no place for a woman. So I kind of worked under cover, doing the work through my husband and my brother.