

Introduction To Forty Acres by Mark Day

BY CESAR CHAVEZ

A great deal of change has taken place among farm workers since our struggle began in 1965. Before the strike started, we had to work ten days in order to get ten people together for a meeting. Now we can get a thousand people to a meeting in only a few hours. The awareness of the people to a meeting in only a few hours. The awareness of the people has been magnified a thousand times over. People have lost their fear. And, because there has been a concrete success in Delano, workers throughout the country are making fantastic demands on our time, organizers, and resources. If we had the resources, we could be organizing simultaneously all over the southwestern United States.

I have always believed that, in order for any movement to be lasting, it must be built on the people. They must be the ones involved in forming it, and they must be the ones that ultimately control it. It is harder that way, but the benefits are more meaningful and lasting when won in this fashion. It is necessary to build a power base. Money by itself does not get the job done. This is why poverty programs have so much difficulty. Although many nice things are said and many wheels are spinning, very little real social change takes place. To try to change conditions without power is like trying to move a car without gasoline. If the workers are going to do anything, they need their own power. They need to involve themselves in meaningful ways. Once they achieve a victory, they can make use of their power to negotiate and change things for the better.

I have often been asked what kind of a union I am trying to build and what type of society I want to see in the future. It seems to me that, once the union members are taken care of in terms of better wages and working conditions, the union must involve itself in the major issues of the times. The problem often arises that a group gets too involved in its own successes and doesn't have time for anything else. It is my hope that we keep ourselves focused on our ideals. It is much easier to profess something by words and not by deeds. Our job, then, is to educate our members so that they will be conscious of the needs of others less fortunate than themselves. The scope of the worker's interest must motivate him to reach out and help others. If we can get across the idea of participating in other causes, then we have real education

As for the nation as a whole, it doesn't matter to me how our government is structured or what type of political party one may have. The real change comes about when men really when men really want it. In a small way we try to change ourselves and we try to change those with whom we come into contact. You can't organize the masses unless you organize individuals. I like to think of our group as a "doer" type union. We place a great deal of emphasis on doing things and very little on theorizing or writing about them.

I think that our philosophy of cooperation with all groups has helped us a great deal. Our people have developed the ability to respect everyone with whom they come into contact: a wealthy church group or a poor Puerto Rican group in New York City. We try to respect their beliefs and ideals. We try to get them to help us on their own terms. We attempt to show them that by assisting us they are doing something to solve their own problems. A lot has to do with respecting other groups. The best thing we have going for us is having all kinds of people help us in a variety of ways.

For example, we tell people, “If you don’t eat lettuce today, you are really helping us.” This is the key to successful organizing: letting people who want to help know what they can do. Many movements do not reach this stage. Everything we do must be clearly defined.

During the course of our struggle, we have come to realize that the poor and disadvantaged will not make the gains they need only by political in politics. A grape grower in Delano has one vote. We have a thousand votes to his one vote. But the grower can pick up a telephone, call Washington, and make himself heard. He has more power than we do. We have begun to ask *why*. Obviously, he has more power because he has the economic power. If we had economic power, our thousand votes would count a thousand times more than any individual’s vote.

Economic development is a *must* for our membership. Why can’t farm workers have a bank? Their wages will still be low for many years to come. If we can retain our increases by buying cooperatively, I think we will be in good shape. We must also get away from the “superconsumerism” atmosphere that surrounds us. We are virtually forced to buy everything that glitters and shines.

Meanwhile, I am not so alienated as others about the absence of political leadership here in the United States. We felt the loss of John and Robert Kennedy very keenly. But, despite this present bad season, I am confident that leadership will appear that is responsive to the needs of the people. Bad times bring good times!

I am often asked if our youth, especially the young Mexican Americans, will choose the way of violence to make the necessary changes in our society. I don’t think that violence will be a way of life for any significant number of people. Although many may espouse the rhetoric of violence, few will physically commit violence. Meanwhile, we must be vitally concerned about educating people to the significance of peace and nonviolence as positive forces in our society. But our concern must not be frozen on a highly sophisticated level. We are concerned with peace, because violence (and war is the worst type of violence) has no place in our society or in our world, and it must be eradicated. Next to union contracts, we must focus our attention to bring about the necessary changes in our society through nonviolent means. We must train effective organizers for this purpose.

We must acquaint people with peace—not because capitalism is better or communism is better, but because, any men, we are better. As men we don’t want to kill anyone, and we

don't want to be killed ourselves. We must reach everyone so that this message can go out. If we do this correctly, our people will rise above mere material interests and goals. They will become involved in cultural matters. And we need a cultural revolution among ourselves—not only in art but also in the realm of the spirit. But too often they are choked they are not allowed to flourish in our society.

People are not going to turn back now. The poor are on the march: black, brown, red, everyone, whites included. We are now in the midst of the biggest revolution this country has ever known. It really doesn't matter, in the final analysis, how powerful we are, how many boycotts we win, how many growers we sign up, or how much political clout we possess, if in the process we forget whom we are serving. We must never forget that the human element is the most important thing we have—if we get away from this, we are certain to fail.

This book, by Father Mark Day, tells of our struggle. It is unique, inasmuch as it was written by an insider, and it is my hope that it will attract more followers to our cause.

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