

The FBI and Cesar Chavez

From 1965 to 1975, the FBI compiled more than 2,000 pages of surveillance material about Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement. Some of the information was provided by agents, some by informants, some by critics of the movement – and unless I am mistaken – some from insiders.

The files available to the Documentation Project – 17 files in PDF format - were not scanned in chronological order, nor were they available in a searchable format. My effort to rearrange the sequence of the files to make them chronological was abandoned because it seemed impossible to accomplish, however, I was able to convert the files to make them searchable.

The primary subject matter contained in the FBI reports was first and foremost about Cesar Chavez himself and secondarily about those staff members who worked with him during the early months of the strike: Dolores Huerta, Jim Drake, Luis Valdez, Wendy Goepel, Alex Hoffman, Chris Hartmire, etc. The work of the NFWA in Texas was also of great interest to the FBI, along with boycott activity in Pennsylvania, Chicago, New York, San Francisco and Denver. A great deal of information was collected about the assassination plot against Cesar Chavez and also the 1973 mass arrests of UFW strikers in the Bakersfield area.

Why would the FBI spy on the Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement? Union organizers, especially those who sought to organize farmworkers were always accused of being “communist agitators” – they were seeking to overthrow the established order. The overriding national security issue after World War II was the worldwide spread of communism and the fear that communist sympathizers would infiltrate and overthrow the United States Government. Sound far-fetched? I agree, but national fear creates paranoia – those familiar with the Bush-Cheney years after 9/11 will understand this phenomenon.

Even so, I still find the FBI surveillance of Cesar Chavez to have been a colossal waste of government time and money – and silly!