

El Malcriado, 1965-66
Bill Esher, Editor

In September, 1965, grape pickers in and around Delano, California launched an almost certain-to-fail strike. They were led by a top-down, undemocratic, underfunded AFL union, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. After 12 days, Cesar Chavez and the 150-family membership of the independent National Farm Workers Association joined in the struggle. Over the next three years, they together transformed the Delano Grape Strike into a revolutionary movement recognized around the world for its demands for justice for farm workers. Their movement newspaper, "*El Malcriado*," played a significant role in that transformation.

In July of 1965, Bill Esher, editor of *El Malcriado*, had approached me to join the staff of the newspaper. At that time, the paper had a circulation of 2000 in Spanish, and had just begun an English edition, aimed at younger Mexican Americans who had been to school in the U.S, as well as non-Spanish speaking farm workers. The paper was being sold on consignment in barrio stores from Pumpkin Center and Arvin in the Southern San Joaquin Valley of California, and up to Madera, 150 miles to the north, as well as by mail order. Chavez and Esher had visited stores all over the Central Valley to establish this circulation. In Corcoran, Julio Hernandez had helped them get a full page ad from a furniture store, which played an important role in financing the paper. A bakery in Delano was another stalwart advertiser. An organizing trip to Healdsburg won the paper some subscriptions in the apple country. And the English edition garnered key subscribers in urban California, including Sam Kushner, a reporter for the Communist newspaper, "*The Peoples' World*," and progressive folks in the Bay Area including those linked with the Committee for Farm Labor.

I was recruited to help in the distribution in the barrio stores, where we would place the newspapers on hooks (a hole punched in the papers with an ice pick; a piece of bent coat hanger as a hook), and try to hang it near the check out register. At 10 cents, the paper was not cheap for a farm worker -- the same as a candy bar or a soda. When we came back two weeks later, we would pick up the unsold copies and receive 5 cents for each copy sold. I might drive half an hour to pick up 40 cents from a tiny store in Yettum. But 8 workers, and hopefully their friends and family, were being introduced to our revolutionary message, that farm workers could change the horrific conditions under which they worked.

The introduction of the English edition, and especially the cover of the police beating a picketer (#17?) resulted in several store owners refusing to carry the paper. After the strike broke out, several more stores kicked us out. (After being kicked out of our

#1 store in the hamlet of Richgrove in October, 1965, we began selling over 200 copies an edition in our #2 store. The owner who had kicked us out invited us back.)

Esher had worked closely with Chavez on almost every issue of the paper through early 1965, and up to September, when the grape strike broke out. He had traveled with Chavez through the state, meeting the core membership in many of the barrios, gaining an intimate knowledge of Chavez' views and philosophy. When the strike broke out, Chavez left Esher to run the paper with almost no supervision, confident that Esher would continue to express a radical and outspoken message as "the Voice of the Farm Worker."

Once the strike broke out, the issue of violence and non-violence became critical. While there was a general consensus among the membership that the struggle was to be non-violent, it was assumed that the growers would use violence, beatings, firings, evictions, jailings against the us. There was a vigorous debate among the members about how far we could go in defending ourselves. The Mexican Revolution and the American Civil Rights Movement were portrayed as inspirational.

On the other hand, the government was portrayed, in articles and cartoons, as blind to the plight of the farm workers, or as willingly manipulated by the growers to serve their purposes and power. In a Zermeno cartoon, the government is pictured as blindfolded while playing a game of chess with the grower, the poor farm workers being the pawns. There is a wonderful fantasy where "Don Sotaco" and his wife visit the University of California at Davis, where government-funded mad scientists are not only developing machines to replace farm workers, but are also genetically modifying humans to produce separate strains of farm workers, extra short ones to cut lettuce, tall ones to pick dates. In 1965, California was governed by Democratic Gov. "Pat" Brown, and the local Congressmen in Fresno and Bakersfield were Democrats friendly to agribusiness and hostile to the strike. On the national level, elements of the Johnson Administration were still trying to promote the bracero program, which by Congressional law was supposed to be phased out in 1964. *El Malcriado* expressed no love for the Democratic Party, and in the 1966 election, pictured Brown as being almost as bad for farm labor as his Republican opponent, Ronald Reagan.

Just as Chavez wanted to keep his movement independent of the AFL and independent of the Democratic Party in 1965, so too was he under no illusions about the Catholic Church hierarchy as being "friends of the farm workers." The history of the Catholic Church in Mexico was always on the side of the Spanish invader, on the side of the rich and powerful and against the poor campesino. But the Catholic Worker movement of Dorothy Day and Aamon Hennesy, and rebel priests like

Father Hidalgo, received honor in the pages of *El Malcriado*, and the Church was scolded for not living up to the Papal Encyclicals on Social Justice. A *Malcriado* cover showing Pope John xxiii weeping (a picture lifted from a *Ramparts* magazine) -- related to a dispute with the Christian Brothers Winery and their treatment of their workers. And some of the most radical and outspoken members of the union in 1965 were Protestants.

The *Malcriado* office at 102 Albany was a cubby hole, with a long, high desk along one wall and a card table with a typewriter across from it, barely room to move between them. Esher was also the manager of the union's nascent coop store that sold retread tires, rebuilt engines and oil, a project dropped after the grape strike began to make total demands on our time and energy. But Esher had a knack for business, and was soon printing buttons and bumper stickers, which supplemented our income. I did little writing that first winter of the strike, being used mostly for circulation, mail order, typing, paste up, book keeping and other administrative chores. I slept on floors at various locations, eventually ending up in a room in Dolores Huerta's house.

In the week after the Filipinos went on strike, I listened in (with my minimal Spanish) as Chavez, Padilla, Huerta, and a few others debated our association's response. An issue of the paper was ready for distribution, with an article on the Filipino walk out, and it was decided to staple in a flyer inviting all farm workers to a meeting in Delano on September 16 to decide what response our union should take. I was soon off to barrio stores with copies of the paper and invitation to come to Delano for what would be the historic meeting. At the meeting, I signed my first union authorization card, for Nash de Camp, a Tulare County grower for whom I had worked briefly in July.

Soon after the strike began, the *Malcriado* staff was joined by Mary Murphy, a vibrant young high school graduate from Catholic Garces High School in Bakersfield. That winter, she recruited another Garces friend, Marcia Brooks. We four became the core of the *Malcriado* staff through 1967. There was a strong Catholic Worker radical orientation among the others, and I began reading the C.W. newspaper and soon too became a convert to the philosophy, though retaining my Episcopalian skepticism of the Catholic Church as an institution.

Many other individuals helped us that fall and winter -- Eugene Nelson, Luis Valdez, and Tony Mendez helped in writing and translations; Sergio Tumbaga and later Rudy Reyes helped with non-writing chores; and Jon Lewis soon arrived and began supplying us with amazing photos. Gilbert Rubio helped with sales of buttons, bumper stickers, flags, and books.

The English language edition immediately began performing an important function in spreading news of the strike to urban supporters, especially in the bay Area and Southern California. Sam Kushner of the *Peoples' World* and Terry Cannon of SNCC picked up our story and were soon spreading the word in their papers and in labor and leftist circles. The *National Catholic Reporter* was alerted and began reporting on our struggle. The American Friends Service Committee, Student Committee for Agricultural Labor, Citizens for Farm labor, and Catholic Worker communities all had an English language source of information and soon began mobilizing in our behalf.

The role of the Spanish language edition was also critical, in spreading the word in farm worker communities, that this "union" and this strike were different, that it was no longer a matter of asking for another nickle or dime, but rather time to begin the transformation of our societies, for "the liberation of the farm worker." An early cover that fall featured a huge ship (a picture lifted from somewhere), with an article on the Longshoremen of San Francisco refusing to load the scab grapes. The paper stressed that we were not going to go away, that we were willing to sacrifice for radically change of this whole society, and that we had friends and supporters all over the country and soon, all over the world.

By the time of the Pilgrimage to Sacramento, in March, 1966, the Farm Worker Press was making a variety of contributions to the movement. We had published Eugene Nelson's Huelga, the First 100 Days of the Delano Grape Strike (and were doing brisk sales, continuing to support our projects while generating contributions to the union). Our subscription list and sales gave the advance organizers a core of contacts in all the Valley towns we would be visiting on the march. In the barrios up to Madera, there was a familiarity with the strike and its issues and personalities that made our welcome in many of these towns really amazing, in spite of the mainstream English language media blackout or minimal coverage. We had printed up copies of "The Plan of Delano" in English and Spanish (with art by Frank Ciecorka) for widespread distribution along the route. And we were playing a important role in the Schenley boycott, sending out info and taking point (an a great cartoon by Andy Zermeno, "The Sinking of the Cutty Sark") as the Malcriado continued to bring in supporters.

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Doug Adair, 7/12/09