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## The Whip and the Bee: Diary from the Grape Strike

When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us.

To try to change conditions without power is like trying to move a car without gasoline.  
—Cesar Chavez

### Los Angeles, 1967

**I** pronounce it like FDR's middle name, and the man at the Greyhound ticket window stares at me. "The bus don't stop at no place like that!"

"You sure?" He nods, and then I spell it out, "D-E-L-A-N-O!"

"De-lay-no. That's different. Sure, we got a 6:30 bus goin' there."

I buy a one-way ticket and start looking for a place to sit. It is close to midnight, but the bus station is still crowded. There is no room on the wooden benches for stretching out, so I prop my feet on my duffle bag and hunch down in a corner. I am half asleep when two cops come by and ask to see my ticket. They barely look at it once I take it out. They are checking to make sure no one is using the bus station as a flop house, and they go up and down the rows of benches like armed railroad conductors, prodding those who are sleeping with their billy clubs. Only rarely do they touch anyone with their hands. It's as if they were worried about infection. The police who ask for my identification when the bus stops at Bakersfield are the same way. I am asked to show my driver's license, but the minute it is out of my wallet, they nod and move on to the man across the aisle from me. We are the only two on the Greyhound they bother with, and they address us both in Spanish.

### The Pink House

THE BUS TRIP to Delano is made up of sprints down freeways, then sudden turnoffs for small towns, and more freeway driving. The foothills along the way are one gray-brown mound after another. Their monotony is broken only by an occasional orange or lemon grove, and I sleep most of the time. I am tired when we reach Delano, but all I want to do is walk. A man outside the bus station gives me directions for the Farm Worker offices, and I start out for them. His directions, I soon realize, are almost unnecessary. Delano is as racially divided as any Southern city, and after a few blocks it becomes clear which part of town is for Anglos and which part for everyone else. I head west, past a cluster of stores and cafés and across the overpass that lets Route 99 cut through the center of town. I am surprised by the heat. It is not just that the sun is hot but that everything around me is. It feels as if there were radiators hidden in the trees and telephone poles. I am 20 minutes outside of town when a car pulls up. I wave it on. My instincts, this first morning in Delano, are to refuse a ride from anyone white. The driver ignores my wave and asks, "You going to the Union offices?" I laugh and get in. He is, it turns out, Jim Drake, Cesar's administrative assistant. He drives me to the Union's main office, a stucco

bungalow with pink paint coming off all four sides. The dirt road in front of the Pink House is lined with beat-up cars, and a half-dozen people are sitting under a nearby tree. I am introduced to the people under the tree, most of whom have also just come to Delano, and then taken to Filipino Hall for breakfast. It is three days before I am assigned to work with the organizers who are laying the groundwork for a strike against the Giumarra Company, the principal grape grower in the area. I have been fearful of getting an office or a research assignment, and now the worst seems over. There is a shortage of sleeping spaces in the houses the Union rents and so, with two others, I move into the back room of *El Malcriado*, the Farm Worker newspaper.

### Card Checks

THE ORGANIZERS' MEETINGS begin at 11:00 in the morning. They start this late because most organizing is done in the evening after the workers come home from the fields, and Bakersfield, where the majority of Giumarra workers live, is an hour from Delano. 10:30 is usually the earliest an organizer can get back home. The only exception is Friday night, when organizing is cut short so that everyone can be at the Union's general meeting. Friday is also special because it is the day on which the Union's \$5-a-week salary is paid. After the general meeting, most of the organizers end up drinking beer at People's Café, where prices are cheap and nearly all the customers are farm workers.

The organizers' meetings are run by Fred Ross, a tall, gaunt man, somewhere in his middle fifties. It is Ross, who, while he was working for Saul Alinsky's Community Services Organization, started Cesar organizing, and the two have been close ever since. Ross introduces me and another new organizer to the group, but that is it as far as our newness goes. We are assigned to work with older organizers, but there is no theorizing, no special explanation for our benefit. It is assumed we will learn what needs to be done by having to do it ourselves.

The first organizers' meeting I attend begins with Ross asking for newly signed union cards. He is like a schoolteacher who has consciously decided to put his students in competition with each other. For those who have brought in only a few cards, there is very close questioning, sometimes sarcasm. For those who have brought in a good many cards, there is praise and usually a much greater willingness to hear out their stories. Most of the teams of organizers have brought in between 5 and 8 cards; the exception is a pair who have brought in 19. The cards represent commitments by the workers at Giumarra to have the United Farm Workers as their union, and they put the Union in a position to call for a card-check election and know that it has the support to win. Still, this is not the main value of the cards. For it is clear that the Giumarras, who insist that their workers don't want a union, will never voluntarily agree to an election. What the cards do is prepare the way for a strike at Giumarra. They give the workers a chance to express their feelings and the Union a chance to make plans: to know the names and addresses of workers, to begin calculating who is or isn't likely to leave the fields when that time comes.

After the card check Ross asks, "Any more new crews?"

"Two more back in the mountains," one of the organizers answers.

There is a groan, and then a decision on who should make the first contact. This will happen at least three more times in the next weeks. Crews we never knew existed will be reported working in some remote part of the Giumarra vineyards. It is this kind of isolation that has made it difficult for the men to know their own strength or numbers, and when I drive to Bakersfield the next night to meet with a family that has not yet signed with the Union, I am immediately confronted with this situation. We meet with a father and his two sons, and most of our time is spent answering questions they put to us about the Union. It isn't that they don't hate

the Giumarras but that they don't know how many other workers are willing to sign union cards and that they fear being blacklisted. They are also new enough to be afraid of their crew leader, and so even when no one from the company is around, they keep to themselves during the day.

### **House Meetings**

BY THE END OF JUNE, I have gotten used to the pattern of organizing. Meetings at 11:00, late afternoon dinner at Filipino Hall, into Bakersfield by 5:30. There are still only about 20 of us doing full-time organizing, but it is going much faster now. We are no longer finding new crews, and more and more help is being given us by the workers themselves. They are bringing in as many cards as we are. We feel sure we already have the signatures of at least 80 percent of the workers eligible to vote in a union election. We are weak only among the Anglo workers. They are suspicious of a union in which the leadership is Mexican American and Filipino, aware that at the very least they can no longer expect to monopolize the higher-paying jobs, such as trucker and irrigator. Many of these men are from families that came to California during the Depression years, and they leave me with a vision of John Steinbeck's Joads accepting everything they once fought against.

With one other organizer, I share responsibility for five different crews. In three of them, we meet with the crew leader himself. In the other two, we concentrate on a group of men who rent the same house. We are in contact with each crew at least several times a week, sometimes to get new names, other times just to talk about how the grapes are ripening. From our point of view the ideal time for a strike is when the seedless Thompsons, the Giumarra's biggest cash crop, are ready for picking.

Early in July Fred Ross makes a decision to hold a house meeting for the crew leaders we absolutely trust. It is a crucial step. So far, the workers have committed themselves

only to wanting union representation. They have said nothing about a strike, and our problem is to see how many are willing to leave the fields when it comes to a showdown with the Giumarras. The meeting takes place early in the evening at a farm house just outside Bakersfield. Some of the men arrive in their own cars, others in the trucks they use to take their workers into the fields. We have to introduce at least half the crew leaders to each other, although many of them have been working at Giumarra for more than a dozen years. There is much joking about the need for introductions. They set the tone for the meeting: the men don't feel anonymous.

When Cesar speaks, it is not to rouse the men but to ask questions. "Do you want a strike? Will your crews stay out? Who else is to be trusted?" These are questions all of us have been asking, but now it is possible to compare replies and have the men judge one another's accuracy. Most of the crew leaders have never seen Cesar before, and he moves among them slowly, listening, asking questions, nodding in sympathy. Although there is nothing striking in anything he does or says, he sets off reactions we have not gotten in the last month. At the end of the evening Fred Ross asks the crew leaders if they are willing to help us arrange house meetings with their men. They say they are, and the stage is set for the most crucial part of the organizing.

### **El Mosquito**

WE TRY to hold the house meetings early enough in the evening so that we can remain outside and not have to turn on lights and be bothered with bugs. Occasionally we bring beer or soft drinks but usually not very much. We worry that if the meetings seem like a party, people will think the Union is trying to trick them. The questions we get asked are nearly always the same. No one believes the company will allow a union without a fight. What they want to know is how they can endure a strike. "Will the Union help with money? What if the Giumarras find out about

the strike ahead of time? What about strike-breakers?" We make no promises. We talk about the Union giving support, but only to those who come to work for it full-time. And we insist the strike must be nonviolent. It is slow going, and often we have a second or third meeting with workers from the same crew. At this time we also begin to publish *El Mosquito Zumbador* ("the buzzing mosquito"). It is a one-page paper, written in Spanish and English. We take it to the crew leaders at night, or deliver it ourselves in the morning by riding the trucks carrying workers to the fields. Sometimes *El Mosquito* does nothing more than list the Union's demands and compare them to the wages the Giumarras are paying. Other times it explains new benefits, such as health and accident insurance. But always it lives up to its name, and whenever there is a rumor or an incident, it appears in *El Mosquito*. At first *El Mosquito* circulates like an underground newspaper, with workers afraid to read it on the job. Then it breaks into the open. We distribute it one morning in front of the Giumarra packing sheds at Edison. Some of the office employees refuse copies, but virtually everyone else takes a paper. One of the Giumarra brothers drives by in a yellow Cadillac and tears up the *El Mosquito* he is offered. It is hard to think of anything more helpful he could do.

## Fiesta

BY THE END of the month we have gone as far as we can with house meetings. It is necessary to see if the workers feel confident enough to turn out in mass for a Union gathering at which they know there will almost certainly be company spies. We decide on a fiesta. It will have free food and *mariachi* bands, and anyone can use these as an excuse for coming, although it is obvious that the fiesta will be for something more. We are worried that not enough workers will come, but we plan for 2,000 anyway and spend the ten days before the fiesta urging our crews to come. Other prob-

lems in managing the fiesta become comic, especially the matter of what to serve. Cesar wants brains as the main dish and says he knows just the man to cook them. Everyone else groans, and for days the organizers' meetings open with someone asking if Cesar has given in on the brains. Finally, it turns out that the man who is supposed to cook them can't be gotten, and we settle on lamb instead.

Our fears about attendance prove wrong. We have more than 2,000, as farm workers who have nothing to do with Giumarra also come. We run out of lamb after several hours of serving, and by the time the speeches begin, we are serving only rice and beans and salad. It is hot inside the arena in Bakersfield where we are meeting, and the crowd is restless at the start, wanting the Union to prove itself, not really believing that they hold the key to a showdown with Giumarra. Only five people have been scheduled to speak, but it is still too many, and when Cesar's turn comes, the crowd is uneasy. He begins in a low voice, not moving his arms, barely moving his feet. He talks the whole time in Spanish, not doing what he usually does, stopping every few sentences and translating into English. I have a hard time following him, but the man next to me translates whenever I ask him a word, and I keep up that way.

It is the Union, much more than the Giumarras, which Cesar wants to talk about.

I want to tell a story about a man with a whip [he says]. This man was an expert with a whip. He could flick the ashes off a man's cigarette while he smoked it . . . even pull a handkerchief out of a pocket with the whip. He could also kill a man with this whip, and because of his temper and his reputation, everyone was afraid of him. His workers always did what he told them, no matter how much they hated it, and his wife and his children were very quiet when he was around the house. . . . After a while, it got so that nobody would stand up to this man, and to keep in practice he began using his whip on anything that

bothered him. A stray dog, a cat, even flies. He was so good, he could take the whip and kill a fly while it was still in midair.

All this went on for many years and then, one day, as the man was sitting on his porch, a bee came buzzing around him. It flew in his hair and around his ears and didn't pay any attention when he tried to brush it away. One of the man's workers was passing by at the time, and when he noticed what was happening, he was very surprised. "Why don't you use your whip on the bee?" he asked. "It's no bigger than any of the other things you've gone after." But the man with the whip just smiled. "You don't understand," he said. "I can kill the bee all right. That would be easy for someone like me. But bees are different from anything I've whipped before. If you go after one, they all come after you. So if I took my whip to this bee, there would be the whole hive to fight. I'd get stung for sure. . . !"

Cesar stops at this point. There is no sound, no movement, just waiting. Then he begins again.

That is what the Union means. The Union is like the bees, and the man with the whip is like the grower. He cannot do anything to one of us without having all of us come after him.

It could not have been more than a few seconds between when Cesar stopped speaking and when people began shouting. But it seemed to take forever, and I remember feeling that silence as important as everything that came after it.

### **Strike Vote**

WE CALL for a strike vote the first week in August on the night after the men get their paychecks. We want to make sure no one has a reason for going to work the next day. The strike vote is unanimous, and the tension is so great after it that speeches are unnecessary. The meeting ends with the singing of *Nosotros Venceremos*, and for a brief moment I feel as if I were in Mississippi again, leaving a civil rights meeting. In less than half an hour we are back in the office the

Union has rented in Bakersfield, planning for the next morning. So far, everything is going better than expected, but we still worry about workers we have not seen at the fiesta or the strike meeting. What will they do? How much influence will they have on their friends? Is it just fear that keeps them away?

The next morning all of us are up by three. Four of the five crews I share responsibility for have said they will join the strike. We drive to the fifth crew leader's house before he is up, and when he leaves, we follow his truck. At every house he stops, we get out of our car and ask the men who are up to stay away from work. More than half do, and by the time the truck gets to its last stop—an ice store—it is carrying only a dozen men. We get out and begin talking with the men, but this time less about the Union than who they are loyal to: those who have joined the strike or the Giumarras. Just as I think we have failed, the man sitting nearest me climbs down from the truck, then two more follow, then everyone climbs down. We promise them rides back home, and they start heading for our station wagon. Suddenly, we realize we will never fit everyone into it, and it is not until their crew leader (who has been opposing us) says that he will drive everyone home that our problem is solved. We follow his truck to make sure everyone gets back home all right, and then we go out to the fields.

The sun is up, and it is still cool, the ideal time in the day for picking grapes. But the Giumarra fields are empty. The only people at the gates I go to are pickets and police. Later we learn that, except for the few Anglo workers, only two crews have broken the strike. Despite the number of men involved, our strategy has been kept a secret and the Giumarras are caught by surprise. It is not until the following week that they realize most of their workers are not coming back, and they start breaking the strike by bringing in crews from Texas and Arizona or border cities like Calexico.

The crews are bused in late at night so they can avoid our picket lines, but they cannot be kept under cover for more than a day or two. Most of the new workers were not told a strike was going on, and getting them to leave the fields is difficult. Roving picket lines, equipped with bull horns, speak to the workers whenever they get close to the road, and sometimes whole crews will throw down their boxes of grapes and leave the job. But most of the new workers are a long way from home and feel trapped. They have no money or transportation, and they don't know where else to look for a job. As the week goes on, new workers are brought in at a much faster rate than we can turn them away. The Giumarras also begin radio advertisements saying the strike is over, and before we can get the advertisements stopped, they have done us enormous harm.

### **Boycott**

WE ASK the Department of Labor and Department of Immigration to check on what the Giumarras are doing (the men in a number of the new crews do not have legal work permits, and it is a violation of the law for the Giumarras not to inform anyone they hire that a strike is going on). But the government officials we speak to are of no help. Unprotected by the National Labor Relations Act, we are as handicapped as any union was before the New Deal. Even with a strike, we have no legal right to a representation election. We can only have one if the company agrees to it. Another week goes by, and it becomes clear that, if the strike is going to be successful and nonviolent, we must move to a national boycott of Giumarra grapes (we later include all California-Arizona grapes when other growers start letting the Giumarras use their labels). Organizers are sent out to key cities, and we begin cutting down on our work in California. Still, we maintain a picket line in front of the Giumarra packing sheds, and when word comes that some Teamster locals are prepared to honor the line, we run it around

the clock. Along with a crew of five workers, I have a midnight-to-eight shift. Our one compensation is that it is cool at night. Not cool enough to wear a jacket but cool enough so that we don't sweat.

Most of our time is spent trying to keep awake. We get threats from some of the white packing-shed workers and from some of the high school boys who have been hired to break the strike, but while I am there, nothing happens. I will be in Cambridge, doing research of my own and working part-time for the Boston boycott, when I will learn that the men I have been picketing with were beaten up so badly they had to be hospitalized. Two of the men were in their sixties. It is enough to make me stop imagining in more detail.

### **Winning: 1970**

I am in the office of the Ladies' Garment Workers' Union in New York when word comes that the Giumarras are about to sign a contract and that the other Delano growers are ready to follow their lead. There has been talk of victory for weeks, and now when it is official, the news seems flat. I look around me at the office the Garment Workers let the New York Grape Boycott Committee share. We have a picture of Cesar and some *Huelga* posters on the wall, but basically the typewriters and the telephones and the fluorescent lights belong here most of all. How different from the Pink House or Filipino Hall, where one never stops running into children. I cannot believe we would take the news about the Giumarras so calmly there. But then I wonder. Somewhere along the way, our organizing has come to take on a life of its own. The satisfaction it provides lies in the effort itself. When it is over and we win, there is a feeling of relief, above all, of purpose, but the intensity is gone. Perhaps we are punch-drunk in a way? I can imagine an outsider seeing us in that light. And then I stop thinking about it. A lettuce strike has begun in Salinas, and I have calls to make. □