

Shattered Dreams

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**The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope,
and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's
Farm Worker Movement**

by Miriam Pawel

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In 1978, just after I graduated from college, I worked at a migrant health clinic in California's San Joaquin Valley and saw what 1960s activism had achieved. Farmworkers received health services at government-funded rural health clinics, regardless of citizenship status or ability to pay, and the landmark Agricultural Labor Relations Act, achieved through a decade of struggle on the part of the United Farm Workers (UFW) movement, promised access to union representation for those who harvested the country's fruits and vegetables.

I lived down the road from the UFW headquarters, a mountain retreat center known as La Paz, and the director of the union's new school for organizers hired me to teach English there. Between classes, I passed Cesar Chavez as he strolled from office to lunch, and at celebrations I watched Dolores Huerta fly across the dance floor, projecting the allure and pleasure that accompanies immersion in a struggle for social justice. I also learned that social movements are sometimes not what they seem.

The graduation for the three English classes at the UFW school was a momentous event. Families arrived in their Sunday best from across central and southern California for a formal ceremony and communal lunch. The high point of the ceremony was a slideshow put together by the most advanced class, setting out in English the students' experiences and hopes for the future. At the end of the show, photos of Cesar Chavez, La Paz, and a farm worker in the fields came onscreen with a voiceover saying,

"The Union is not Cesar Chavez, the Union is not La Paz, the Union is the farmworkers."

In the bright sun, families strolled from the school building to the dining room, congratulating the graduates and helping themselves heartily to the cafeteria-style buffet. Soon after lunch began, however, Huerta stood up to denounce an act of treason. "There are traitors here who want to destroy Cesar," she said with characteristic fierceness. These covert enemies, Huerta explained, had inserted the words "The Union is not Cesar Chavez" in the slideshow as part of an effort to usurp the leader's authority, and they needed to be named and expelled from the movement.

Huerta demanded that the teachers identify the authors of the subversive phrase. The teacher of the advanced class refused, as did the rest of us. The meal ended quickly and awkwardly, the families dispersed, and the teachers from all three classes were ushered to a small table in a backroom office. Confronted there by Huerta, Richard Chavez, and Cesar Chavez himself, we were accused of being part of a subversive plot, railed at, called "chicken shit" by Cesar, and thrown out of La Paz and the union.

I went home distraught and scared. I understood that I had been part of a purge, but I didn't understand why the purge had happened or what it meant. And like the protagonists in Miriam Pawel's groundbreaking and deeply moving *The Union of Their Dreams*, I did not speak of these events to anyone for more than a decade and never aired them publicly.

Thirty years later, Pawel's meticulously documented book portrays the rise of the UFW and the mix of passion, solidarity, and organizing genius that enabled it to take on the largest agricultural enterprises in the country. And *The Union of Their Dreams* clears up the mystery carried inside everyone who worked for the movement through the late 1970s and early 1980s, from lawyers and ministers to farm

workers and volunteers. What happened to make such a successful and inspiring victory for social justice end in bitter, drawn-out defeat? Pawel's nuanced analysis brings with it a sad truth most people don't know: only a tiny percentage of California's farmworkers are unionized today, and the pay and working conditions in most of California's fields are as bad as they were in the 1960s, before the landmark struggle that captured the national imagination. Today workers live in cars, shacks, and rundown barracks, and the UFW can neither organize farmworkers nor win union elections effectively.

The big lessons of *The Union of Their Dreams* go to the heart of dilemmas faced by movements for social justice. How do you balance internal democracy with the need for quick and effective strategizing? How can extraordinary leaders be held accountable as they pursue visionary goals? What are effective ways to combine the kind of direct action that challenges the powerful with the long, slow work in institutions that often consolidates gains for poor people? And finally, should movements demand sacrifice and unlimited commitment from activists or should they make it possible for those fighting for social justice to lead sustainable economic and personal lives?

The Union of Their Dreams paints a vivid portrait of the cost of leadership that stifles dissent and activists who accept being silenced for the sake of the struggle. Pawel recounts the story through the words and experiences of eight key participants—a minister, two lawyers, three Mexican American farmworkers, and two Anglo boycott volunteers—painting the big picture by providing the texture of individual lives. She begins with the innovative strategies and iconic moments of the UFW's rise to national prominence, then moves seamlessly to the conflicts the UFW faced in becoming a functioning labor union, from administering hard-won contracts to navigating Chavez's utopian visions and authoritarian practices. The book's achievement rests in part on Pawel's remarkable sources: six hundred hours of tapes Chavez made of UFW meetings from 1965 to 1980 and sent to the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University; and the trust and frankness with which Pawel's informants spoke to her, overcoming the shame of silence and defeat so

she could tell this story.

In 1965, nineteen-year-old Eliseo Medina witnessed the farm worker strike in his hometown of Delano and immediately signed on to the nascent organizing campaign taking shape there. A natural at understanding the needs of his fellow farmworkers and persuading them to picket and strike, Medina recounts the moment of pure joy he experienced with the union's first election victory—indeed the first-ever secret-ballot election for farmworkers in the United States—at the DiGiorgio ranch in Delano in 1966.

Thirty-three-year-old Chris Hartmire, who ran the California Migrant Ministry, joined Cesar Chavez in Delano as the first strike began and in short order put the ministry at the service of Chavez and the union. With his clear and persuasive missives, Hartmire galvanized a nationwide network of supporters, from key organizations of religious leaders to teams of sympathizers in cities and suburbs across the country.

Jerry Cohen, a twenty-six-year-old lawyer working for California Rural Legal Assistance, met union staff at Delano's People's Bar and offered advice in a free-speech dispute involving union protesters. His subsequent meeting with Chavez began the fifteen-year run of an eclectic, unorthodox, and wildly successful legal team that could spin circles around California's growers and their own high-priced lawyers.

When courageous strikes proved insufficient to challenge the strength of the California growers, Chavez looked outward to a country where protest and mobilization had gained unprecedented traction. Recognizing the contemporary power of claims for social justice, Chavez sent farmworkers who had never left their home state to organize consumer boycotts in Chicago and New York City with a few dollars in their pockets and the names of one or two contacts. That imaginative leap gave birth to the grape and lettuce boycotts, the national campaigns that urged consumers not to buy nonunion products, garnering thousands of fervent UFW supporters nationwide and bringing some of the most powerful U.S. agricultural corporations to the bargaining table.

The book presents pivotal 1960s and early 1970s moments in the UFW's trajectory, from the initial strikes on the part of Filipino farm-

workers in 1965, which spurred the nascent Farm Worker Association to action, to Chavez's 1968 fast for non-violence, which he carried on for twenty-five days and ended with Robert F. Kennedy at his side. As the UFW amassed power through tactics of nonviolence and sacrifice—volunteers for the union worked night and day for no pay, just food and housing—the sale of grapes and Gallo wine plummeted, along with the public image of the companies that produced them. Three years after the boycott began, the growers of the Coachella Valley met the UFW's demands.

More than two dozen of them signed union contracts in the vast UFW meeting hall in Delano. John Giumarra, Jr., the Stanford-educated son of the grower known as the Grape King, outlined what was at stake, at a moment when growers and farmworkers alike were beginning to believe that agriculture in California would become a unionized industry: "If it works well here," he said, "if this experiment in social justice as they call it, or this revolution in agriculture however you want to characterize it, if it works here it can work elsewhere. But if it doesn't work here, it won't work anywhere."

It is not surprising that growers throughout California continued to oppose the UFW, bringing to bear the combined force of police, courts, and hired thugs to oppose higher wages and a functioning union run by the workers. What is more surprising is that Chavez himself saw unionization as a threat and acted to undermine it, ultimately crushing the very workers who had gained confidence and voice through their experience in the UFW and become leaders in their workplaces.

Was the UFW to be a union or a poor people's movement? Throughout the UFW struggle, Chavez envisioned a movement that challenged the powerful through direct action in the streets and fields. He was consistent over decades in his belief that campaigns for social justice depended on such organized force for their moral and political clout. From the first strikes, Chavez infused the UFW with a religious sense of mission, embodied in his fasts and in visions of a self-sustaining, quasi-religious order to nurture the movement at its core and expand

the struggle. As soon as the early grape contracts were signed, Chavez began to speak of a Poor People's Union and farm worker cooperatives, endeavors he later asked Chris Hartmire to initiate at La Paz.

Chavez was the first to see how the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, by offering guarantees for union organizing, would shift the work of the UFW from protest to administration, and he wanted none of it: "We don't want to win elections anymore," he told a key Catholic leader. "We want to prove to you and everybody else that the whole thing stinks." And he maintained this line, preferring to fight grand battles against the system rather than to work within its new institutions, even at key moments in the 1970s when members of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board supported the UFW's goals and were poised to work in its favor. "The more we win," Chavez said with regard to elections brought by the new law, "the weaker we're going to get."

Without providing explicit analysis or commentary, Pawel's narrative makes the case that Chavez's lack of interest in establishing a well-run union was the central factor in the UFW's eventual weakening. Sent to administer contracts in Calexico in 1971, Medina turned his organizing skills, honed on the picket lines and boycotts, to making the union work, providing benefits for workers and order and predictability for growers. Faced with the reality of the fields, he understood that farmworkers were not revolutionaries, as they were sometimes depicted in boycott activities in the East. Rather, farmworkers were "just trying to make a living. A decent living. These are people who are trying like hell to get themselves a strong union." However, the UFW wasn't functioning very well in the fields: the union's hiring halls were inefficient; field offices were disorganized, and health insurance plans didn't provide promised benefits.

But when Medina brought his concerns to board meetings at La Paz, which he did repeatedly over years as a board member, they were belittled or ignored. The polite young man, long in awe of Chavez, gradually realized that the visionary leader looked down on the workers themselves—for what he saw as their interest in money for their families, rather than broader social change—and did not share

Medina's conviction that the first task of the UFW must be to secure and administer decent contracts. This would detract time and attention from seemingly bigger and more important battles of the sort Chavez relished, and for which he was adept at strategizing and gaining widespread support. In a poignant final meeting in 1978, Medina laid out his ranch-by-ranch analysis of the area around Salinas, where he had been sent to organize, and the staff and budget he would need to carry out the task. When Chavez turned on him, attacking his proposal in the communal dining room at La Paz, Medina packed up and left the union.

Chavez didn't agree with Medina that the union needed to be run by farmworkers. The absence of democratic decision-making procedures in the UFW reinforced the tension between union and movement and made it impossible to debate these matters openly. Indeed, differentiating union business from Chavez's desire for a broader-based poor people's movement, and doing so in a democratic fashion, might have energized both struggles and provided a more sustainable path to the future. Had Chavez been willing and able to delegate authority and relinquish control, then others could have run the union, and Chavez himself might have focused on building a broader poor people's movement.

Instead, UFW board meetings functioned to produce the outcomes Chavez wanted, and he manipulated people and facts to achieve this, down to unfounded accusations and character assassination. So what looked like democracy to outside observers—long hours of discussion at La Paz or workers voicing concerns and opinions at the 1973 UFW convention—was characterized candidly by Hartmire after that convention as "controlled democracy." Chavez put it more bluntly, lamenting the "so-called democracy" in which the leader, as he explained it, must inevitably get rid of his strongest people because otherwise they will get rid of him.

Immediately after the passage of the ALRA, Chavez began to turn on his trusted supporters. He purged them from the union over a period of five years, from 1976 to 1981. The climate of fear and distrust worsened with the introduction of the Game, borrowed from the cult-like drug rehabilitation program Synanon.

Chavez saw in Synanon an efficiently-run alternative community with lessons for the poor people's commune he hoped to establish, and in the Game he sought a means to renew the commitment to sacrifice on which the union had long been based. Playing the Game, a harsh variant of the encounter group therapies popular in the 1970s, participants ganged up verbally and emotionally against one member, hurling brutal insults and criticisms, ostensibly with the goal of strengthening the group. By mid-1977, the Game was played weekly at La Paz, and almost everyone there joined in, along with union staff from around the state. The purges and the Game worked in tandem, setting the stage for UFW members to turn on one another as Chavez dictated, even as they suspected or knew the trumped-up charges to be false.

In her vivid description of the purges, as in many other parts of *The Union of Their Dreams*, Pawel makes spectacular and persuasive use of the tapes Chavez sent to the Wayne State University archives. Here is Chavez in 1968, even before the first big UFW victories, talking about other farmworker leaders and prophesying the future:

In a confrontation, I can beat them. I can beat them because they haven't been around organizations, they don't know how to stab each other. And I know how to do every fucking stab. But once you do that, so you do it to save the union, then every time there's opposition developing, boom, you get them . . . In other words, I got to pull a Joseph Stalin. . . . And I don't think I want to do that. By the time I do that, then I'll be a different man. Then I'll do it again for some other reason.

Chavez also insisted on sacrifice and total commitment, repeatedly refusing to pay union staff and saying, "We'll organize workers in this movement as long as we're willing to sacrifice. The moment we stop sacrificing, we stop organizing. I guarantee that." The union ultimately broke apart over issues of pay and democracy. When Cohen and his stellar legal team, which had played a key role in the union's dramatic successes, insisted on an increase in wages (unlike other staff, lawyers were paid, but only \$750/month) Chavez refused, despite significant

support on the board for the lawyers' proposal, and by 1981 the entire legal team had left.

Chavez savagely opposed the growing autonomy and initiative of the paid reps, the farmworkers who were elected by their peers to head ranch committees and do union business, from contract administration to organizing. In the final sections of *The Union of Their Dreams*, Pawel recounts the moving story of these paid reps through the activities of Sabino Lopez, an irrigator, and Mario Bustamante, a lettuce-cutter, both of whom became leaders of the increasingly self-confident Salinas vegetable workers. In 1980-1981 the paid reps in Salinas won election after election for the UFW, working effectively as a team to extend the union's reach in the region. In response, Chavez acted to keep them from winning seats on the UFW board, outmaneuver their votes at the 1981 convention, and oust them from their paid posts. When other approaches failed, Chavez fired them outright, though he had no right to do so, and the reps sued. But by the time the paid reps won their case in court, they were long gone from the union, unable to find work in the fields, and the union itself was in shambles.

Pawel does not tell the union's history from the perspective of Chavez himself, so the reader must piece together his view. This is an elusive task, despite the many revealing anecdotes and quotations, because the context is always provided by others. Some of the deepest questions, such as why Chavez wouldn't dedicate time and resources to building the foundations of a well-run union, remain only partially answered. Nor does Pawel give us the view of ordinary farmworkers, as they encountered the electrifying movement battles and the reality of union contracts. And the book would benefit from more attention to the weight of gender in this story, especially Huerta's role as a powerful and charismatic woman at the pinnacle of the movement (and an avid collaborator in the purges and the Game) and the impact of sexism in the daily functioning of the UFW, from macho swaggering and decision making by men to Chavez's continual references to women as seducers and spies.

But the story Pawel does tell is riveting. In the end, those who were purged from the UFW left in great confusion and pain. They kept

silent because they could no longer work for a great cause and believed they would weaken it by speaking out. But the paid reps in the fields, including Lopez and Bustamante, did not go quietly. They are the most moving heroes of Pawel's story. Those Mexican American farmworkers who rose up to run the union in the fields—the real fruit of the two-decade UFW struggle and the core of an empowered new generation and democratic union—spoke back to Chavez and fought him even after they were told to leave, something that none of the Anglo lawyers, ministers, boycotters, and organizers chose to do.

So what was going on at the English class graduation in 1979? Pawel shows that in the months before the ceremony at La Paz, militant vegetable workers in Salinas were waging and winning key strikes, despite Chavez's insistence that the strikes were costly and unwinnable. Among the unprecedented gains of the successful strikes was the requirement that employers pay farmworkers to work for the union as paid reps.

The tape of a meeting of field office directors at La Paz reveals that Medina said the offending words in 1971, as he explained the importance of having workers take ownership of their contracts. "I want to make this one thing clear," he told the group in Chavez's presence. "The union is not Cesar Chavez. The union is not La Paz. The union is in the field offices, where the people themselves are building it."

So Chavez and Huerta were likely right that the phrase in the graduation slide show was an attack on Chavez, placed as it was at the center of a gala public event at La Paz at a time when workers in the fields were challenging Chavez head-on. But Chavez and Huerta were wrong about how to sustain a union and forge a broader movement.

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