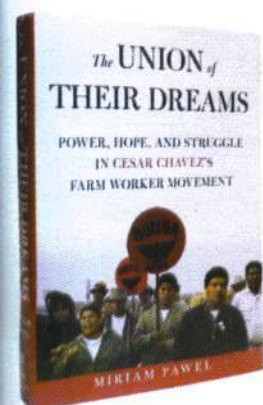


The Union of Their Dreams:

*Power, Hope, and Struggle
in César Chávez's Farm
Worker Movement*

BY MIRIAM PAWEL

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Separating Man from Cause

A REVIEW BY PETER ORNER

First there is the icon—then there is the human being. Icons, of course, are far easier for people to digest. Icons are safe. Icons grace murals. Streets and schools and parks are named for them.

César Chávez certainly lives on as an icon. A former farm worker, not only did Chávez challenge powerful landowners and growers, he also brought millions of ordinary American consumers directly into the fight for better working conditions and fair wages.

These days, however, Chávez is often revered more as a symbol than a man. And as far as icons go, he's still, to many, not quite a household name. At a health food store in California, where an image of Chávez lorded over the cash register, I happened to point up and ask the clerk, "Who is that?"

"I think it's Che without the hat," the guy said.

Miriam Pawel's new book provides a well-rounded and at times controversial look at the man behind the icon. She focuses on Chávez's well-known triumphs, but also on his failures of leadership, his inflexibility, and his occasional paranoias (some justified, others not).

Pawel's book, which began as a series of articles in the *Los Angeles Times*, also gives the reader a view from the

trenches—a day-to-day look at the operations of the United Farm Workers. Pawel brings much-needed attention to the foot soldiers who helped Chávez build the UFW by tracing the lives of several important members, including Eliseo Medina, the young grape picker who became a pivotal figure in organizing the grape boycotts, and Chris Hartmire, a Presbyterian minister who worked with Chávez to shape his message in a religious as well as economic sense. In narrating their stories, Pawel gives us a vivid picture of the UFW's setbacks as well as its successes.

Pawel also emphasizes that Chávez's day-to-day leadership of the UFW often lacked focus. At the very moment in the late seventies when the union was growing exponentially and demands on it were increasing, Chávez rejected the notion that it was necessary for the UFW to have a paid staff. (He felt that salaries might destroy his dream of creating a cooperative community.) At other times, he railed at his staff about phone bills and those who "failed to fill out telephone chits." Far worse, according to Pawel, in 1977 Chávez

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About Miriam Pawel

- Born in 1958 in Great Neck, New York
- Worked as an assistant managing editor at *Newsday* and the *L.A. Times*
- Was the editor of Pulitzer Prize-winning stories in 1996 (about *TWA Flight 800*) and 2003 (about *California wildfires*)
- Worked as a journalist for twenty-five years before writing *The Union of Their Dreams*
- Was named an *Alicia Patterson Foundation Fellow* in 2007
- Was named a *John Jacobs Fellow* at the *Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies* in 2008
- Now lives in Pasadena
- "History shows good people doing bad things, and one over-arching lesson is that heroes are very human and not infallible." —from a "Q&A with Miriam Pawel" posted on the official website of *The Union of Their Dreams*

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became heavily involved with the philosophy of Synanon, a once-respected drug rehabilitation community near Fresno that, according to *Time* magazine, had devolved by the late seventies into a cult. At La Paz, Chávez implemented what was referred to as "The Game," a group exercise popular at Synanon where union members "indicted one another for bad behavior and hurled obscenities in a therapeutic effort to enhance communication." The Game also led to witch-hunts within the union, during which supposed traitors were drummed out.

Eventually, Hartmire and Medina fell out with Chávez, and, after many years of loyal service, left the UFW. (Medina is now Executive Vice President of the Service Employees International Union and a living legend in his own right in labor circles.) *The Union of Their Dreams* tells the stories of these (and other) significant but unheralded UFW figures, men and women who dedicated themselves, heart and soul, to the UFW, and on whose energy and labor Chávez depended.

Ultimately, however, Pawel concludes that the UFW has had fewer lasting accomplishments than Chávez's iconic status suggests. A number of those whose lives Pawel chronicles feel as though the promise of La Causa was squandered by failures of leadership, distractions, and infighting within the union. Today, Pawel argues, thousands of farm workers in the U.S., especially in the Imperial Valley of California, where many of Chávez's most intense battles were fought, are nearly as destitute as they were in the 1970s. This is a grim conclusion, and, in my view, Pawel oversimplifies by suggesting that the situation on the ground now, in the vineyards and the lettuce fields, is a direct result of the past mistakes of Chávez and the UFW. No doubt some of the responsibility can be laid at the feet of the union, but this doesn't mean there aren't a host of other factors that have contributed to the lack of progress in recent years. What about changes in the way agribusiness fights organized labor? What about the influx of non-unionized, undocumented workers? What about changes in the political climate in California and nationally between the '70s and now?

The bottom line is this: it is difficult to imagine quite how bad things would be had the union not created an environment where improvement was even possible. Chávez, for all his flaws as a leader and a man, demonstrated that farm workers not only had dignity—they had power. Chris Hartmire, responding to criticism of Chávez

Huelga

September 1965

Eliseo

Eliseo Medina was stuck at home, watching reruns of *I Love Lucy*. You can't pick grapes with a broken leg, and there was not much else to do in Delano, California.

Life in the small San Joaquin Valley town was as monotonous as the flat landscape and as predictable as the streets that ran from west to east in alphabetical order. One-story bungalows and pastel-colored ranch houses barely broke the horizon, tapering off into miles of fields. There was only one clear boundary in Delano—the railroad tracks that split the town in two.

The serious teenager with the disarming smile lived two blocks west of the tracks, where the sidewalks stopped and the run-down housing started, and immigration agents knocked on doors in the middle of the night. Eliseo lived with his mother, two sisters, brother-in-law, niece and nephew at 418 Fremont Street, three generations in a two-bedroom frame house with a bathroom and shower out back. Behind the house ran the alley they used as a shortcut to the candy store and People's Bar, where Eliseo learned to play pool. A mile the other direction was Fremont Elementary School, where Eliseo had landed in fourth grade, speaking only Spanish after two years on the streets of Tijuana. His intelligence and curiosity propelled him to success even in a school that

in 1977, wrote that "Farm workers are human beings and so are their leaders... The changes that are happening within the farm workers' community represent human liberation beyond anything that could have been dreamed of fifteen years ago."

Pawel herself acknowledges, "As bleak as his legacy in the fields, César Chávez left behind a generation imbued with the confidence they could make a difference and schooled in the ways to accomplish change." If there has been a backslide, and there are many indications that there has been (according to Pawel, "There have been no contracts in the Imperial Valley for years"), it is up to a new generation to take up where Chávez left off. In many ways, by illuminating the lives of those who worked so hard for decades, Pawel's book provides a kind of blueprint for today's activists. It is a chronicle of great struggle, but also of hope. As Sandy Nathan, a lawyer who worked with the union's legal department, put it toward the end of his career with the UFW, all the hard work was, for him, about the cause of the farm workers—not one man. *The Union of Their Dreams* takes an important step toward reminding Americans that, three decades on, La Causa very much remains. ☉