

## 6. César Chávez Speaks with Bob Fitch About La Causa, 1970

FITCH: The first question I'd like to ask is "Why [table grape] boycott?"

CHAVEZ: You know, when you consider everything, we don't have any options. Most of the other things that would have been options depended entirely on the good will of the government and we know enough to know that they're not going to move. Especially, they're not going to move in a conflict situation like ours. Personally, the big reason was this: I thought the American public would respond affirmatively. . . .

F: What's the realistic basis for optimism about a public response to the boycott?

C: Well, first of all, I contend that not only the American public but people in general throughout the world will respond to a cause that involves injustice. It's just natural to want to be with the underdog. . . . In this struggle it's . . . a contest between a lot of people who are poor and others who are wealthy.

F: What happened to the other options? Such as legislation?

C: . . . Once you get into legislation then it's the whole question of compromise. The only reason growers are seeking legislation now, after 35 years, is because they are under pressure. They want to use legislation to take away that new-found right the workers have found through the boycott.

F: What do you mean?

C: Legislation that's being proposed permits unions but takes the boycott . . . away from the workers, and doesn't permit them to strike during harvest time. Of course that's the only time we work. The proposal comes not out of a spirit of giving the workers civil rights, but as a gimmick to further restrict their rights.

F: Why can't you stop the importing of Mexican labor?

C: It's a long history of the government and the employers working together. . . . In fact, it's part of the system. Even under the most liberal administrations we wouldn't get them to enforce border controls. The immigration service and the border patrol always worked on the assumption that it is not really illegal for these people to be here provided they are working, are being useful to the growers. The moment they stop being useful—either because they strike or because they don't work any more since the crops are finished—then of course it becomes very illegal and they are thrown out. It's a very corrupt system.

F: "Corrupt" implies collusion to break the law, which is a very heavy charge. Do you want to make that charge?

C: Sure, sure, except that I'm not saying that money crosses hands. What I'm saying is that the guy before me did it, the guy before him did it, so I can't change it. It's that kind of setup.

F: That takes any connotation of deliberate action away from the growers.

C: No, it's a deliberate attempt, it's very deliberate, most deliberate! What I'm trying to explain is that it is more sinister than if they were paying money. This way the immigration service people are as much servants as we are. They're not getting paid off. They do it because of the power that the industry represents. So it's worse than if they were actually being paid money.

F: What happened to the strike?

C: To strike in any rural setting in any state today—and I don't care what state it is, California, Texas, Florida, Arizona—you're fighting the growers . . . in their own setting, so they are able to bring the tremendous powers from the police and the courts and all the structures against you on the picket line to break it totally. . . . The injunction is just a manifestation of the power they have. There isn't enough money or time or energy to be appealing all those things that they keep throwing at you. The boycott gets them out of the setting. They can't reach us in the boycott. The farther away from Delano, the more diffuse their power is.

F: Has the boycott worked?

C: We figure that we are cutting back the sales now by about 33 per cent. But all that means is that we are forcing them to cold-storage the grape. The grape hasn't been lost yet. And in order to be 33 per cent effective we would have to keep up the same kind of pressure or increase it in the coming weeks.

F: What is the main issue of the strike?

C: The central issue is the whole question of recognition. Do, or will, workers have the right to have a union and have it recognized by their employers?

F: How do the growers respond?

C: Mostly they say that workers don't want a union, that if workers wanted a union they would give them a union. . . . The employers are still at the point where industrial employers were 50 years ago. They say, "If you want a union come and get it." In other words, "Force me to give you a union."

F: And what evidence is there that the workers want a union?

C: Well, I think that the only kind of evidence we have . . . is the experience we've had in eight different cases where they've given workers a right to vote on whether they want unions or not. They have overwhelmingly voted that they want a union.

F: So you're ready to put it to a vote?

C: Oh sure. See, when the employers say that we don't recognize the workers or that workers don't want a union, we say give the workers the right to make this self-determination by giving them the right to an election, with the understanding on our part that if the workers vote against the union we'll call the thing off. But if the workers vote for the union, then the employers are duty bound to bargain collectively and to sign a contract with the union.

F: Who supports you?

C: Number one, the public. They were given something to respond with. That's important. Then labor, for money and technical assistance—and from just being around them you learn a hell of a lot. . . . I think the church brings the other kind of power. The moral power and the kind of assurance that what you're doing is really an important task. That fortifies you in your spirit. It legitimates the movement at least against the reckless attacks from the right. . . .

F: Why are you an advocate of nonviolence?

C: . . . I have been asked this question many times and I have really had to dig back and find out. I think it goes back to my family, particularly my mother. She's a . . . pacifist. She never learned how to read or write, never learned English, never went to school for a day. . . . In the old days, . . . there were occasions when she would gather us around her and she would call it *consejo*. "Consejo" means to council, to advise. . . . I remember that she would talk constantly about nonviolence—constantly. She used many *dichos*. "Dichos" are sayings, parables—for instance, things like "It takes two to fight; one guy can't fight by himself," or "Flies can't come into a closed mouth; keep your mouth shut."

F: So nonviolence was your nursery.

C: I would think so. . . .

F: Does the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee want to be more than a union, a force for social reform?

C: I think that if the union loses the social force it has now it's going to become pretty meaningless. The most important thing is to provide an instrument with which workers, by their own actions and their own desires, can work themselves out of poverty.

F: It's an instrument or tool for poor people in this nation?

C: Yeah, for poor people. This is always the first order of business. But once that's attained and once they are well on their way to attaining the first contracts, to having the union recognized—along with that comes responsibility. If the workers keep that social consciousness and use it as an instrument, not only will they help themselves, but they will also help others less fortunate, and they will be a voice in society against those ills that are part of our life.

F: . . . Why do you think you can succeed whereas that union wasn't able to?

C: Well, let's say we hope that it will be different; that remains to be seen. . . .

C: . . . We have such a big job, an overwhelming job, in building the union. That job hasn't been done yet. We're just now beginning to do it.