Introduction: Symposium on Cesar Chávez and the United Farm Workers

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It has now been twenty years since the death of Cesar Chávez. He remains an iconic, foundational figure in the political, cultural, and moral history of those who now comprise the nation's largest single ethnic minority. And he is a figure, following only Martin Luther King and John L. Lewis, who embodies the capacity of a vibrant twentieth-century social movement to make a substantial impact on politics and policy in the nation as a whole. While King was never much of an institution builder, the life and work of Cesar Chávez is properly associated with the United Farm Workers (UFW), a trade union that Chávez helped found and that he led for nearly three decades. That union still exists, but it is a shadow of its former self: Its membership is relatively small in California agriculture, and it no longer sustains the radical program or the transformative dream of those millions, Anglo and Hispanic, whose loyalty it once commanded.

That American trade unions have encountered difficult times will come as no surprise to the readers of this journal. However, it would be a mistake to ascribe the demise of the UFW merely to the larger set of headwinds encountered by American labor as a whole during the last third of a century. Instead, as the contributors to this symposium make clear, the organizational crisis encountered by the UFW some forty years ago cannot be divorced from the Chávez persona and the leadership, institutional and ideological, that he offered to the United Farm Workers. For years much of this was obscured by the journalists, sociologists, and other scholars whose studies of the UFW emphasized its innovative social movement character, among a population that had faced exploitation and repression for too many decades. But in recent years a new generation of scholars and journalists has begun to revise and rewrite the history of this union-cum-social movement to find complexity, contradiction, and conundrums in place of the uplifting narrative that once embodied the story of Cesar Chávez and his union.

What lessons can we learn from the farmworker experience that apply to how we think about the strategy that the labor movement and its allies pursue today, less in the fields and food processing sheds than in big box retail, the new set of fulfillment centers and warehouses now being staffed by subcontractors for Amazon and Walmart, among home health care workers, indeed among all those American workers who stand in relation to their employer and to the state where the farmworkers stood in 1965, without a warrant to claim anything more than a fading piece of the American dream?

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As with the farmworkers half a century ago, millions of American workers are without industrial citizenship, and this is not simply because many lack the formal immigration documents.

Two generations ago it was thought that agriculture was the great exception when it came to unionism, collective bargaining, social policy, and the rights of workers under the New Deal era labor laws. But today vast slices of the American occupational landscape have come to replicate the pathologies once thought unique to growing grapes, lettuce, and lemons and hiring the workers needed to harvest them. Today, an increasingly large number of enterprises in the service sector and in manufacturing look like the kind of growers whose production had a seasonal rhythm, who hired temporary workers, subcontracted various parts of their business, and employed workers who are often undocumented.

Cesar Chávez and the United Farm Workers fought with this postmodern form of business organization by developing a series of tactics and strategies that are today something close to standard operating procedure throughout the union movement and much of progressive America. Community organizing, corporate campaigns, consumer boycotts, and a high level of political engagement are all hallmarks of the UFW at the height of its creativity and power. Chávez and the UFW pioneered what is at the very least a commonplace aspiration for contemporary unionists: the idea, if not the reality, of a union as a social movement. And it remains a signal accomplishment of that small union that it not only organized the largest and most effective boycott since the colonists threw tea into Boston Harbor, but that the UFW did what the AFL-CIO has never done: gotten a truly progressive labor law enacted in an industry that bitterly resisted such a legislative innovation. This was California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act, enacted in 1975.

Indeed, Chávez and his comrades understood that traditional weapons deployed by workers, especially the strike, were indeed problematic when managers and financiers can so easily transform the once unitary, vertically-integrated corporation into something far less knowable, tangible, and strikeable. So they pioneered the "corporate campaign," the cross-cultural alliance, the connections with clergy, students, and progressive political figures that are so important in contemporary efforts to tame the sweatshop and regulate global supply chains, in durable goods as well as food products.

But such social movement unionism is not a magic bullet for what ails the self-organization of the working class. Putting aside the problems of charismatic leadership, well explored in this symposium, what are the democratic mechanisms that can be put in place to govern such a sprawling and multifaceted coalition? What are effective ways to combine the kind of direct action that challenges the powerful with the long, slow work of institution building that often consolidates gains for poor people but only in a highly stratified fashion? How can extraordinary leaders and movement entrepreneurs be held accountable as they pursue visionary goals? These are the kinds of issues that today face the staff-heavy service sector unions that recruit generation after generation of

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college student organizers but find it difficult to develop an organic set of responsible working-class leaders or a democratic set of internal structures. And it is a dilemma faced by all social activists, at home and abroad, whose most effective tactics involve an appeal to the consciousness of well-off consumers when they act on behalf of workers in the global South and elsewhere. Revisiting the experience of the UFW may well help us develop answers to some of these questions.

The participants in this symposium are all authors of important recent books on Chávez and the UFW. Matt Garcia, a professor of history at Arizona State University, is author of *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chávez and the Farm Worker Movement* (2012). Miriam Pawel is an award-winning journalist who worked for twenty-five years at *Newsday* and the *Los Angeles Times.* She is the author of *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chávez's Farm Worker Movement* (2009). Frank Bardacke, a teacher and labor activist in Watsonville, California, worked in the Salinas Valley fields for seven years. He is the author of *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chávez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (2011), winner of the Sidney Hillman Award. Their essays were originally offered at a 2011 conference, featuring new scholarship on Chávez and the United Farm Workers, sponsored by the Center for the Study of Work, Labor, and Democracy at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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