

A Turning Point

It should come as no surprise that in the development of any organization, a situation arises, a decision is made, and the result becomes a turning point in its history. Unfortunately, the turning point does not become evident until years later, when the time has long since passed to redo or undo what has already been done.

Some turning points may contribute greatly, if accidentally, to the successful outcomes of an organization, but there is little motivation to uncover and examine such points because it is generally assumed that the successes realized were the inevitable product of wise decision-making. There is little reason to question success, even if, truth be told, it was accidental or lucky.

But when a successful organization unexpectedly tacks off in a different direction or begins to stall or experiences a downturn in its fortunes, surely a turning point must have occurred. What happened to cause this change? Why did it occur? And when? What is to be gained by uncovering such a turning point? Even if it can be identified with some certainty, there is nothing to be done about it. The organization cannot rewind, erase, and redo this series of events. However, in the case of the farmworker movement, I believe such an examination, even if only an historical exercise, would be helpful to the Farmworker Movement Documentation Project in its effort to explain the history of Cesar Chavez and his movement.

Some long-term and very dedicated former United Farm Worker volunteers have generated controversy and manifested much personal resentment – even bitterness – about their dashed hopes regarding the outcome of the farmworker movement. Some of these former volunteers characterize the movement as snatching defeat from the jaws of victory; others talk about the failure to capitalize on a once-in-a-lifetime window of organizing opportunity; others talk about a wave of paranoia that spawned internal purges of seasoned leadership; and others still seem confused and bewildered about what happened to them personally as a result of their involvement.

Happily, my own period of involvement with the farmworker movement was not colored by these kinds of deeply felt disappointments, and while I do not share their sense of loss, I certainly respect and honor their views and feelings

about their own experience. Had I been there with them during the course of these events, perhaps I, too, would have become disillusioned and discouraged, I cannot say.

With my bias clearly stated, it is my intention to lay out for those interested my view about this aspect of the movement. With the benefit of 30 years' hindsight, I believe it was the resounding defeat of Proposition 14 in 1976 that was a significant turning point for Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement.

Thirteen years after the founding of the farmworker movement (National Farm Workers Association, 1962), the cause of the farmworkers had generated enough leverage to cause the passage of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act. So much leverage, in fact, that the growers begged a liberal governor and a Democrat, Jerry Brown, to propose farmworker legislation written by the legal staff of the United Farm Workers. In exchange, the growers would deliver enough Republican votes in the Assembly and Senate to assure passage of the bill as written, without amendments.

The purpose of this legislation was to guarantee California farmworkers the right to secret ballot union representation elections. Given more than a half-century of adamant opposition by national and state agribusiness employers to the rights of farmworkers, the California ALRA was one of the most important milestones in the annals of U.S. labor history.

After a decade of strikes and boycotts, the logjam of pent-up frustrations was broken by an outpouring of union organizing campaigns throughout the state. In the summer and fall harvests of 1975, more than 40,000 farmworkers voted in hundreds of secret ballot elections for a union of their choice (or no union). Without doubt, the farmworker movement had reached its zenith; the endgame was at hand.

Because of the tremendous demand for farmworker elections – accompanied by the filing of many hundreds of unfair labor practices, which needed to be investigated and adjudicated – during this short agricultural peak-season time frame, the state board (ALRB) exceeded its start-up budget and sought a supplementary appropriation to continue its work. This time, however, the growers used their political muscle to prevent Republican legislators from

voting to support the appropriation. The Democrats could not persuade their rural colleagues to support the measure, and the governor had already expended much political capital to get the original legislation passed. For lack of a supplemental appropriation, this new state agency, not even a year old, shut its doors, laid off its employees, and archived its files. The 1976 summer harvest seasons came and went, but the much-vaunted Agricultural Labor Relations Act was still in mothballs.

Because of the closure of the ALRB, Chavez threatened to place an initiative on the California ballot (November 1976) that would guarantee access of union organizers to farmworkers who lived in grower-owned camps and/or who worked in the fields. Even though there were some limitations provided, in effect, union organizers would not be subject to the usual restrictions of private property rights. “No Trespassing” signs might not apply to union organizers seeking access to workers.

When the legislature did not restore funding for the ALRB in time for harvest elections in 1976, Cesar Chavez made good his threat and qualified Proposition 14 for the state ballot in record time. The California growers, using the sanctity of private property as their theme, smeared the farmworker initiative, and the proposition was defeated by a 2-1 margin – a devastating political defeat and a public relations disaster for Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement. It was also a classic case of “overreach.”

I knew Cesar Chavez well enough to now write that this statewide public rebuke hurt him personally and shook his confidence; he was embarrassed and hurt that his movement had been handed such a major setback. Worse yet, he had no one to blame but himself, and Chavez was not the kind of person who easily accepted criticism and blame – far from it!

In the aftermath of the campaign, contrary to his customary leadership practice, he would not permit any public discussion or critique within the movement organization about the failed Proposition 14 political campaign, which, of course, served to frustrate the pent-up emotions of hundreds of full-time volunteers and their leaders, who had poured themselves out non-stop for several months in near-round-the-clock campaign activities. The volunteers and their leadership were physically and emotionally exhausted, but they were not permitted to relieve these frustrations in any organized,

thoughtful, and affirming manner. Chavez simply expected the movement to ignore the reality of this defeat and the public rebuke that came with it, pick up the pieces, pull itself together, and carry on as if nothing had happened. But something had happened, and it changed the course of the organization – a turning point.

In 1977, following the Proposition 14 defeat in November 1976, Chavez began to experiment with the use of the group encounter game as developed by the Delancey Street and Synanon organizations. The purpose of the game was to create a roundtable of no-holds-barred, bare-fisted truth-telling that targeted one of the participants in order to confront and break down any denial about his/her drug addiction and associated behavior. After breaking down the personal defenses of the addict, recovery could begin, or so it was believed. Both Delancey Street and Synanon claimed great success using this confrontational method. In the case of his community of volunteers in the farmworker movement, Chavez believed it would promote open and honest communication one with another, better self-realization by the participant targeted, and, ultimately, the game would produce a specialized cadre of selfless, dedicated, and loyal organizers to further the cause of the farmworkers. Suffice it to say that for some, the game had a very positive effect; for others, a negative one; and for some, it brought to an abrupt end their desire to continue with the movement.

Chavez's use of the game, in my view, was an honest effort to experiment with a self-help method to revitalize his movement staff and volunteers and to produce a highly motivated strike team of organizers. It was also very useful as a volunteer control technique because it highlighted those less motivated and therefore less likely to be trusted. I am not in a position to judge whether the benefits of the game outweighed the losses, but it certainly sowed confusion among some movement volunteers and created negative fallout and resentment for others. (Full disclosure prompts me to add my personal view: Cesar's use of the game with volunteers was unnecessary, misguided, and a big mistake.)

Cesar Chavez felt threatened by the loss of Proposition 14 and feared for the life of his movement, and with some reason. Within the movement itself, there was a subtle but growing challenge to his leadership authority and to his role as the founder of the movement. I do not suggest there was any effort

afoot to replace him, but there certainly were efforts to modify the power of his unilateral veto.

It started, I think, with the farmworker health clinics. The volunteer clinic doctors and other medical personnel chafed under Chavez's directives about the practice of medicine, especially birth control counseling and the use of contraceptives (more or less ignored by medical personnel, as far as I can tell) and his insistence that the primary role of the clinics was to serve the needs of transitory organizing campaigns and to limit medical services to workers approved by the union. This tension began with the founding of the first Delano clinic in 1966, and as the Farm Worker Health Group grew, especially during the table grape contract years (1970-1973), along with the Robert F. Kennedy Farm Worker Medical Plan, this tension became much greater and more outspoken. For one thing, there were far more medical professionals involved than previously, and some of them had their own vision about what healthcare for farmworkers should be, who should be served, and what was primary.

By the end of 1977, the UFW had closed the clinics in Delano, Coachella, Calexico, and Sanger. The Salinas clinic was closed in 1978. The decision seemed precipitous. I am not sure there was any significant debate at the executive board level about such a major decision, and while I was not present, I have concluded that the decision to close the clinics was made by Chavez himself.

Admittedly, the cost of the clinics might have made them unsustainable in any event. Even though the medical staff were paid as volunteers, I know from my own involvement with the Health Group that the early clinics cost the movement a great deal of money, and if the point ever came when the medical volunteers had to be salaried, the costs of the clinics would likely be unsustainable by a farmworker movement itself struggling to survive.

The volunteer legal department became another source of challenge to Chavez's vision for his movement. For one thing, the legal department was headquartered in Salinas, not at La Paz, which was the headquarters of the UFW. Even though Chavez tolerated this arrangement (primarily because of Jerry Cohen, I think, but also because of the importance of the role of the UFW attorneys in the organizing campaigns), he never accepted it. More and

more, he viewed the legal department as quasi-independent, aloof, and even insubordinate. After Proposition 14, he decided to bring them to heel. The fact that the legal department was lobbying to change the volunteer wage system made him all the more determined. Chavez deemed the volunteer system to be the cornerstone of his movement, and he would brook no opposition about this, and he did not.

Even at the executive board level, there was discussion by some officers about changing the volunteer system. Chavez agreed this policy matter would be settled once and for all by a majority vote of the UFW executive board. I have no doubt the board would have voted to change the volunteer system had Chavez not packaged the vote as a referendum on his role and his leadership of the UFW. He stated his position clearly: if you vote to change the volunteer system, I will resign. Was he bluffing, do you think? No, I think not, but on the other hand, I knew him well enough to say that he would not have drawn such a me-or-you line without having first counted the votes.

Yet another issue surfaced during this time about whether or not farmworker union locals should be created and operate separately from the United Farm Worker international union. Actually, there were good reasons to do this, especially if you think in labor union terms, but Chavez did not think in those terms. How often did he raise the rhetorical question with the executive board and staff volunteers at various assemblies: is the UFW a labor union or a movement? The Cesar Chavez I worked with and knew well for more than 10 years was wired to give only one answer: a movement. He viewed union locals as a threat to his movement vision. I doubt it comes as a surprise to anyone that Cesar Chavez was not viewed by the national body of the AFL-CIO as a bona-fide labor leader – one of their own, so to speak. They were correct; he was not.

Finally, there was another variable present after the defeat of Proposition 14, which would cause an organizational upheaval – the surplus of volunteers. The union had recruited hundreds of volunteers, in addition to its own boycott volunteers, to gather signatures and campaign for Proposition 14. Additionally, the UFW had used these volunteers to work in the first Jerry Brown for President campaign in 1976. (Because of the closure of the ALRB, the UFW devoted most of 1976 to political campaigns.) By the beginning of 1977, the UFW had hundreds of volunteers at the ready and not much for

them to do. The national boycott was dormant, the political campaigns were over, there was little or no strike activity, and the ALRB was still closed. All that was left to sponge up the excessive numbers of volunteers was some staff work at the La Paz headquarters, some field office contract enforcement work, and some general organizing activities. During this aftermath period of Proposition 14, it seemed like the movement was simply marching in place.

Many volunteers complained that they were not being utilized, or they were not appreciated, or they should have more input about the policies and the direction of the union. Other volunteers were completely fried from exhaustion, both physical and mental, from the intensity of the 1976 Proposition 14 campaign and needed some extended vacation and/or leave periods. All this, combined with the use of the game, Chavez's visit to President Marcos in the Philippines, the lack of personal spending money and time off, and the grinding nature of the movement itself, contributed to the growing internal discord in the movement. Save for the founder and a handful of other true believers, movements are not a way of life for the vast majority of people and never will be. The breakup began.

The upheaval during this period, 1977-1978, created a sea change in the leadership of the union. After the dust settled, aside from Chavez himself, only one member of the original board of directors was left. Most key staff members from the era of the Delano grape strike were gone, many boycott volunteers left, the clinics were closed, the legal department disbanded, and some volunteers, including long-termers, were pushed overboard. Cesar Chavez and his movement turned a corner and began anew with a fresh deck of cards from which to deal.

I offer no value judgment about what Chavez did, how he did it, or whether he should have done what he did. In my view, Cesar Chavez, as a founder, was free to create his movement in accordance with his own vision, and his followers were free to stay or go as they wished. My purpose is to identify and provide some explanation why the post-Proposition 14 campaign was a self-inflicted turning point in the history of the movement.

I look forward to reading – and responding to – the critical comments and analysis of others regarding my rationale of this turning point for Cesar Chavez and his movement.

