

CHAPTER 13

The First Big Test

It's tough enough just fighting a company. Or it's tough enough just fighting another union. But when the company and the union are working hand in glove, it's a hard combination to beat.

As soon as Chavez announced the Schenley agreement, some marchers on the *peregrinación* tore up their BOYCOTT SCHENLEY signs and tossed them in the air. Others crossed out SCHENLEY and wrote in DIGIORGIO.

DiGiorgio was not only the largest grower in California but also a symbol of corporate agricultural power. With ties to the Bank of America, offices in the hub of San Francisco's business district, and a history of violently putting down labor strife in the fields, DiGiorgio offered Chavez an attractive villain.

The DiGiorgio empire had been built by Joseph DiGiorgio, who arrived in America as a fifteen-year-old Sicilian fruit peddler at the end of the nineteenth century and rose to run a multimillion-dollar food company. By 1966, his four nephews had taken over and expanded from vineyards, a winery, and a shipping and distribution network into canned goods and juices. DiGiorgio was the largest grape, pear, and plum grower in the United States. As with Schenley, only a small percentage of DiGiorgio's business was directly affected by the strike. The company had been shifting more and more investments out of agriculture; only about 20 percent of DiGiorgio's \$100 million annual revenue came from farming. Most came from sales of well-known brands such as S&W Fine Foods and Treesweet. So the threatened boycott caused concern.

Robert DiGiorgio, one of Joseph's nephews, had been trying to convince his partners to get out of the fields altogether. Farming was too

perilous, dependent on factors outside the grower's control, and yielded only a modest income at best. If a union contract proved unworkable, he could use the labor problems as an added incentive to sell the DiGiorgio land. Robert DiGiorgio threw down the gauntlet: he called for an election among workers in his grape vineyards.

Chavez had no choice but to accept. He knew the challenge was fraught with problems. Who would be eligible to vote? What were the rules? Who would enforce them? But he had been demanding elections for months, and his supporters would not have understood had he turned down the opportunity.

As Chavez faced the first significant test of his union's power in the fields, he drew on everything he had learned. Unlike his campaigns in the CSO, he did not have to rely on his relatives, nor did he have to do everything himself. He had a team of savvy, dedicated advisers and dozens of zealous volunteers, including farmworkers, students, nuns, and ministers, eager to carry out any request. And once again, he had the help of "Papa Ross."

Fred Ross had returned from Syracuse and moved to the Bay Area, where he worked as a consultant for several community organizations. One group had asked him to research Chavez's death benefit plan, so Ross took the opportunity to visit his old student in Delano a few weeks after the march to Sacramento. Chavez was heading into a meeting with DiGiorgio officials to discuss election protocols, and Ross tagged along. The April 20, 1966, meeting was interrupted by a phone call about a violent confrontation on a picket line outside DiGiorgio's Delano ranch. Chavez and Ross rushed out to investigate.

At the center of the disturbance, crestfallen, stood Ida Cousino. Ross realized they had met a week earlier in Sacramento. Cousino had sought out Ross when he arrived on the final day of the *peregrinación* and introduced herself. "She wants to be an organizer," Ross had written in his journal. Now he and Chavez found the young woman looking desolate as two farmworkers nursed injuries, one with bad wounds to his head. Cousino had been picketing when Hershel Nuñez, a DiGiorgio security guard, drew his gun and pointed at the picket line. Cousino announced she was making a citizen's arrest. That brought DiGiorgio managers to the scene. One shoved her roughly out of the way, she fell to the ground, and pickets scrambled to her defense. They tussled with the DiGiorgio supervisors, who struck two workers in the head. Chavez publicly denounced the company and broke off negotiations, then called a

meeting for that evening. At the standing-room-only session in the Negro Pentecostal Church, he chastised his members and lectured for almost two hours on the importance of nonviolence: "If we return the growers' violence with our violence, we will lose." They were only defending the honor of a woman, protested the men, one with a bandage covering ten stitches in his head.

"Through it all, Ida had sat slumped down, head bowed and desolate. She looked so pitiful sitting there as the battle roared around her," Ross wrote. "Sad, I'm sure, that the men who sprang to her aid were being punished, hurt that the brave thing she had done out there in the field had gone unrecognized. I thought I would see her after the meeting and give her a word of cheer. But the moment the meeting was over, she was gone." Ross found his introduction to the strike dramatic and exhilarating. He decided to stick around for a while, much to Chavez's delight. He gave instructions to put Ross on the payroll at whatever terms he wanted, a rare order. Ross and Cousino began to spend time together. Soon they were romantically involved, one of many couples who formed in the charged ambiance of the shared fight.

As talks over the terms of the election continued, union organizers worked to get DiGiorgio employees to sign cards pledging support to the National Farm Workers Association. Suddenly they heard a disturbing report: Teamsters were circulating cards in the fields as well. The DiGiorgios had recruited the Teamsters, a scandal-scarred union that had been expelled from the AFL-CIO and had a record of signing contracts that allowed management to retain most of its prerogatives. DiGiorgio supervisors began urging workers to sign Teamster cards.

With no agreed-upon rules for the election, Chavez faced long odds and a well-financed campaign by twin antagonists, DiGiorgio and the Teamsters. DiGiorgio fired workers at will, targeting Chavez supporters. Even if fired workers were ultimately ruled eligible to vote in an election, most would be long gone and far away by the time of the vote. The NFWA had no official lists of employees and no access to workers in the fields of the Delano ranch, which was crisscrossed by eleven miles of roads that divided the vineyard into one-mile squares. Neither Chavez nor Ross had ever run a union election campaign. Their budget was so precarious that when the phone bill was too high one month, Chavez put a lock on the phone.

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190 workers in crews where the NFWA had strong support. “But when the company and the union are working hand in glove, it’s a hard combination to beat.”

Ross and Chavez teamed up again to do what they did so well—win over one person at a time. The campaign combined Ross’s meticulous attention to detail and discipline with Chavez’s creative genius and instinct. Through the ups and downs of the next four months, they used all the tactics they had employed in the CSO, and many new ones. The union dispatched “submarines” who worked on DiGiorgio crews and quietly talked up the union’s cause. DiGiorgio workers who voiced support but were afraid to walk out were schooled in ways to help from inside. Women who packed grapes pricked them with pins so they would rot.

Joe Serda had grown up in a migrant family and picked grapes since he was a small child. He had worked his way up to foreman at DiGiorgio, a good job. Now his daughter was on the picket line. When she came home with bruises on her legs where the company trucks had deliberately bumped the picket line, Serda began to attend the union’s Friday night meetings. Chavez, Ross, and Orendain came to Serda’s home one night and appealed for help. Don’t walk out, Chavez said; smuggle out information. Chavez gave clear instructions: find out who was being hired and fired, where grapes were being shipped, and how many were in storage. Serda decided to risk his job for the cause. At Chavez’s instigation, the foreman collected trash from the DiGiorgio office and brought the crumpled paper to the Pink House each night, where union leaders taped together torn documents to gain valuable intelligence. When he was eventually discovered and fired, Serda proudly joined the union full-time.

Barred from the fields and blocked by anti-picketing injunctions, the union came up with a novel way to circumvent the restrictions and reach laborers as they left the fields. Richard Chavez built an altar to Our Lady of Guadalupe on the back of a station wagon. The car parked across from an entrance to the DiGiorgio fields; a religious shrine did not violate the injunctions. The shrine drew people for prayer, especially women. Volunteers wrapped themselves in blankets to stay warm during all-night vigils and served hot chocolate and tamales to the penitents—and handed out union cards to sign.

When he needed to up the ante, Chavez called on Chris Hartmire and a Catholic priest to accompany him into one of the DiGiorgio camps in

San Diego from which striking workers had been evicted. Chavez called Valdez, too, who arrived at night and found Chavez rolled up in a blanket, sleeping in a park. The next morning, the union leader, the priest, and the minister accompanied strikers into the DiGiorgio camp. They were arrested for trespassing, strip-searched, and held for hours. Chavez “was, of course, not overlooking the strategic importance of such a confrontation,” Hartmire noted in a letter detailing their arrests. The publicity helped raise money, and the stories inspired loyalty and emboldened workers. Here was a leader, Valdez said, who was one of us, sleeping in a park, risking arrest to help farmworkers.

The greater the challenge, the more people looked to Chavez for direction. When they panicked, he remained collected. Their education and experience had not equipped his volunteer staff with a fraction of the understanding of power and human nature that Chavez demonstrated. Their awe grew each time he calmly counseled a distraught forewoman who had lost her job or turned a setback in the fields into a public relations success.

Ross was astonished by how Chavez had grown, his ability to make decisions and to think several steps ahead of the opposition. “Jesus, I had thought of him as a brilliant guy, but I felt he went beyond that,” Ross recalled a few years later. “He could do in thirty minutes what it would take me or somebody else thirty days.”

Chavez had to think fast when DiGiorgio suddenly announced the company would conduct an election on its own terms—clearly designed to end in a Teamster victory. “They’re animals,” Chavez said angrily about the DiGiorgios. “You can’t trust them. The other growers tell you something and you can be fairly sure they’ll do it. Not DiGiorgio.” Chavez obtained a court order to remove his union’s name from the ballot. Then he switched messages and began urging workers to abstain in protest.

On June 24, 1966, the day DiGiorgio had selected for the vote, hundreds of protesters stood outside the polling place. Each time a bus pulled in carrying workers to the polls, a priest prayed and the protesters dropped to their knees. Many DiGiorgio workers defiantly refused to disembark. Joe Serda’s crew returned to the fields and embraced one another for their courage in standing up for their rights. Almost half of the workers refused to vote; of 385 who cast ballots, 281 voted for the Teamsters.

Chavez and Huerta called in every political favor to persuade Governor Brown to intervene and negotiate terms for a fairer election. Brown was facing Ronald Reagan in a difficult campaign for reelection. The

governor had been criticized for his handling of the Berkeley student protests and the 1965 Watts riots, and he was anxious to make amends for his decision to snub the farmworkers on Easter. Chavez's request also coincided with Brown's appearance before the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) to seek the group's endorsement. MAPA made clear that its support was contingent on Brown's intervention. The governor agreed to appoint an independent mediator. The mediator concluded that the first election was invalid and promulgated rules for a second vote. All parties agreed. The campaign was on.

Chavez explained the terms to a packed meeting at Filipino Hall. In less than two months, on August 30, 1966, farmworkers would vote in an election supervised by the American Arbitration Association. The union had to stop boycotting DiGiorgio. If they lost the election, they could not attempt to win recognition at the vineyard for at least a year. "We had to give up a lot to get this," Chavez told the crowd. "I think it's a good thing."

They also gained a lot. Each union now had access to the DiGiorgio property at certain times and was given company lists of employees. Most significantly, any worker who had been on the payroll when the strike began, or had been employed for at least fifteen days since, was eligible to vote. With those ground rules, Ross was in his element—one three-by-five index card for each voter, three meetings a day, nothing taken for granted. Ross taught a new generation of organizers the lessons he had taught Chavez a decade earlier.

One of those novices was Eliseo Medina, a twenty-year-old farmworker from Delano who had joined the union the day after the strike vote in Our Lady of Guadalupe church, so caught up in the fervor that he broke open his piggy bank to pay three months' dues. The son of a former *bracero*, Eliseo had emigrated from Mexico as a child and lived on Fremont Street, near where the Chavez family had lived a generation earlier. He loved to read and excelled at school even though he had arrived in fourth grade speaking no English. But when teachers explained that Mexicans should enroll in vocational classes in high school, he saw no point. Like Cesar, Eliseo had left school after eighth grade to help his mother support the family. He had first been drawn to the union through the early editions of *El Malcriado*, impressed by the saga of Jimmy Hronis—an Anglo labor contractor brought to justice for cheating sugar-beet workers. For a farmworker such as Eliseo, being cheated without recourse had seemed until then an inevitable part of life. Medina had volunteered for picket duty early in the strike and tasted for the first time

the power that came from collective action. Cesar Chavez became more than an inspiration; he was a hero.

Medina's intelligence had impressed Jim Drake, and his good spirits and loyalty caught the eye of Dolores Huerta. When Medina inquired about working under the new Schenley contract, she recruited him instead to work on the DiGiorgio campaign. Now he reported to Ross.

Each day began with a meeting in the Pink House to discuss the day's message. Organizers from each union were allowed into the DiGiorgio vineyard for an hour at noon. Workers ate lunch in the shade of walnut trees outside the commissary, a grassy area that quickly became known as the "bull ring." Ross drummed into his organizers that their job was to explain the benefits of the union, not engage in name-calling with the Teamsters. But the lunch hour invariably ended with the two sides hurling insults back and forth. The Teamsters called their adversaries the "Viet Cong" and threw in frequent references to Cuba and Fidel Castro.

DiGiorgio bosses had access to workers all day. They could threaten, cajole, and promise, and each time they fired a union supporter, the action reminded others of the risk. DiGiorgio handed out leaflets urging a pro-Teamsters vote: "The Teamsters do not want support from beatniks, out-of-town agitators, or do-gooders." Like most growers, DiGiorgio had one camp for women and separate camps for Mexican, Filipino, black, Anglo, and Puerto Rican men. They justified the segregation based on ethnic food preferences, but the divisions helped growers play one group against the other, bestowing such favors as better food on certain camps. Union organizers were allowed access to the camps between 5:30 P.M. and 7:30 P.M. During the same evening hours, Ross sent a different team to fan out across Delano and track down workers who lived outside the camps or had quit when the strike began.

Dozens of the early strikers had left the area long ago, many returning home to Texas. Chavez had fought to get them included in the election; now he had to find them. The Rev. Gene Boutillier from the Migrant Ministry took one list. Gilbert Padilla took another. Hartmire sent a letter to religious leaders in Texas asking for help. They located eligible voters, persuaded them to return, rented a bus, paid their transportation, and promised food and shelter until the August 30 election.

Each day, the union mass-produced bulletins featuring a character called El Mosquito Zumbador, who "buzzed" around with a simple, clear message of the day. In the final weeks, the union bought dozens of one-minute radio spots on Fresno and Bakersfield stations, most featuring El

Mosquito Zumbador buzzing with the latest news. As the Teamsters increased their red-baiting, El Mosquito Zumbador responded with cartoons that showed former Teamster president Jimmy Hoffa behind bars. The AFL-CIO purchased and distributed dozens of copies of *The Enemy Within*, Robert F. Kennedy's account of corrupt practices within the Teamsters. On the Sunday before the election, Medina and his partner drove into the camp and were surrounded by Teamsters who began punching him through the car window. He got out with a busted lip. The NFWA quickly churned out another leaflet about Teamster violence on the Lord's day.

Chavez had taken charge of the DiGiorgio campaign, but Larry Itliong and AWOC also helped, focusing on the Filipino camps. Bill Kircher, the AFL-CIO director of organizing, had been spending his time not with his own organizing committee but with Chavez's union. Since they had talked on the march to Sacramento, Kircher had worked to soften Chavez's resistance to joining the labor movement. They had been discussing terms of a possible merger ever since.

As the election neared, the two separate unions became increasingly unwieldy. Kircher negotiated the terms of a merger, and then he explained the arrangement to workers at several large meetings. Kircher had a big blackboard and recorded the tallies as members voted their approval. The new union would also be an organizing committee of the AFL-CIO, a status that carried a monthly subsidy. They agreed on a new name: the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC).

For AWOC, the merger was an official recognition that the Filipinos had long since ceased running the strike they had bravely launched. Itliong became the assistant director of the new union. For Chavez, who had eschewed and denigrated traditional labor unions, the move also represented a bow to reality. For the foreseeable future, he was dependent on the labor movement, though he never embraced it, nor did most labor leaders ever shed their wariness about him. As with his decision to join the strike, Chavez didn't really have a choice, so he worked to turn events to maximum advantage. One immediate benefit was badly needed financial help; by summer, the DiGiorgio campaign was costing \$25,000 per month, \$4,000 in gas alone. The AFL-CIO provided an immediate \$10,000-a-month subsidy.

The merger was not universally popular among Chavez's staff, and ideological splits on the picket lines widened. Many of the volunteers who had come out of leftist political groups looked on the labor

movement with abhorrence. The AFL-CIO had recently purged unions for alleged Communist ties, and AFL-CIO president George Meany staunchly supported the war in Vietnam. At People's Bar, where the staff gathered to drink beer and shoot pool, many of the committed leftists reacted with disgust. Chavez had sold out to a corrupt institution, they said. Chavez's response was clear: "I told them that the grassroots had to run the strike. I said they were here as servants of the union, not to run the show, and that they had to work disinterested in the politics of the union."

Chavez was leery of labor leaders for his own reasons, and continued to talk derisively about many. But he was also the ultimate pragmatist. He needed the help, and he recognized there was a price. When you get down in the gutter, he told Cousino and Frankel, you're going to get dirty.

The merger, designed in part to unite two ethnic groups that had little contact and some friction, had another lasting repercussion. Filipinos ended up feeling like second-class citizens in a Mexican-controlled union. Despite Chavez's efforts to stress the multiracial nature of the organization and his occasional overtures to the Filipinos, the divisions widened. Chavez made some public efforts to include Itliong and a few other Filipino leaders, but their backgrounds and interests clashed. They were too materialistic, Chavez complained, and he had nothing in common with them, nothing to talk about.

For the moment, however, those differences paled in comparison with the stark contrast between UFWOC and the Teamsters. The Teamsters ostentatiously arrived in the DiGiorgio fields at lunchtime in brand-new Cadillacs and boasted about their wealth. Their organizers camped out at the Stardust Motel, gathering each night to drink beer, compare golf scores, and swim in the pool. They were confident of victory, relaxed up until the night before the election. The famous bookmaker Jimmy the Greek put the odds of a Teamster victory at 3-1.

Unlike the Teamster office, which was deserted on election eve, Filipino Hall was full of energy and excitement, trepidation and laughter. The Teatro Campesino skewered DiGiorgio and the Teamsters. The crowd sang songs. Finally, Chavez spoke briefly. "I think we have done all the work that is necessary. I hope that with the help of God, we will be victorious."

On August 30, 1966, cars lined up outside union headquarters at five o'clock in the morning, waiting to take voters to the polls when they opened an hour later. All day cars shuttled voters back and forth, just like election day in Oxnard in 1958. Teams of poll watchers with lists of

eligible voters crossed off names and sent others to find the missing voters before the polls closed. At 8:00 P.M., the ballots were locked up and escorted by members of the California Highway Patrol to San Francisco to be counted. Joe Serda went along as the delegate to stand guard. Huerta gave him a Dexedrine to make sure he stayed alert.

On the morning of September 1, union members gathered in Filipino Hall to await the results. Of the eighteen hundred eligible voters, only seven hundred currently worked at DiGiorgio. The outcome could well hinge on how many of the fired workers had come back to cast votes. Jon Lewis, a talented photographer who had lived around the corner from Luis Valdez in Haight-Ashbury, had followed his friend to Delano and been shooting pictures ever since. He captured the tension in the hall as they waited, the unusual sight of Chavez calming his nerves with a cigarette. Then Chavez stepped up to the microphone, resting on a stand almost as tall as he was, cigarette still in one hand, in the other a paper with scrawled numbers.

There were two separate tallies: an election among a small unit of workers in the DiGiorgio shed, and the big vote for the field workers. First Chavez read the results for the shed unit: Teamsters 94, UFWOC 43. With his usual dramatic flair, Chavez saved the best for last. The results in the election for the field workers: Teamsters 331, UFWOC 530. The room exploded. They lifted Chavez up high in the air and paraded him around the room. Priests, students, and workers were cheering and crying and screaming, throwing themselves at Chavez. A woman handed him a statue of Christ and he held it above his head.

They could not know that the victory would hasten the DiGiorgios' exit from the fields and put hundreds of workers out of jobs only months after they signed a contract. The downside of targeting a large publicly traded company, as would become apparent again and again, is that shareholders care only about the bottom line. Unlike the Delano growers, who lived on the land and had a personal connection, the corporate entity had no such sentimental attachment.

But for the moment, all that mattered was the remarkable underdog victory. There were 513 votes cast from strikers and laid-off workers, who did not have to fear repercussions for their support; though some of those votes were challenged, they clearly swung the election in the UFWOC's favor. Many workers had already sacrificed their jobs to speak out for the union. They sacrificed again to journey back to Delano. Workers who had received only a mimeographed letter from Chavez had

returned from as far away as Mexico, walking into the union headquarters in rubber-soled sandals and saying, “Quiero votar por Chavez” (I want to vote for Chavez). They had traveled back to Delano because they believed Cesar Chavez’s struggle would improve the lives of farmworkers everywhere, and the victory was sweet revenge.

For Chavez, the victory vindicated his strategy and affirmed the depth of his support. The Teamsters might have had reason to be confident about winning among workers in the fields; they never imagined Chavez and Ross could conduct such a methodical search and persuade so many former workers to return to Delano and vote.

If he had lost the election, Chavez said a few years later, that would have been the end. “We didn’t have the credibility with the people yet, we weren’t established, we were just beginning. I think the public wouldn’t have supported us after that.”