

Item #11  
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# CÉSAR CHÁVEZ, THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS,

AND THE FARMWORKERS'  
STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE



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Between 1898 and 1908, California experienced a major influx of Japanese farmworkers.<sup>11</sup> The Japanese initially underbid agricultural workers from other ethnic groups and rapidly dominated the fields.<sup>12</sup> However, after establishing themselves as the premier farm workforce, the Japanese began to command higher wages, and worse, from the grower perspective, started to exhibit signs of labor militancy.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, much to the chagrin of domestic agriculturalists, the Japanese formed cooperative farms and became a financial threat to domestic growers.<sup>14</sup>

The Japanese practice of family wage economy—a system where all members of the family contributed their earnings to the collective—became central to the farms' competitive edge vis-à-vis the established agricultural interests.<sup>15</sup> Dismayed by the resourcefulness of the Japanese, domestic growers successfully lobbied for the passage of the Alien Land Law in 1913—a law that barred Japanese from purchasing or leasing land for more than three years.<sup>16</sup> Undeterred, the Japanese began circumventing the punitive legislation by forming cooperatives in the names of their American citizen children.<sup>17</sup> Outraged by this defiant show of entrepreneurship, domestic growers struck back in 1920 by convincing legislators to pass an even harsher Alien Land Law that “barred ‘aliens ineligible to citizenship’ from leasing land or from acquiring it through corporations or in the names of the American-born children.”<sup>18</sup> The final blow to the Japanese came with Congress's enactment of the Immigration Act of 1924, which barred all immigration from Japan.<sup>19</sup>

With the Chinese and the Japanese out of the fields, agribusiness began yet another search for cheap, hardworking, and docile labor. Since the late 1870s, the advent of the railroad had begun to modernize Mexico and had incited a significant transformation in the Mexicans' traditional way of life.<sup>20</sup> These changes, and the reactions to them, contributed to the Mexican Revolution in 1910.<sup>21</sup> In order to survive the effects of modernization and the Mexican Revolution, many Mexicans became economic migrants and left their homeland to seek a better life in the United States.<sup>22</sup> Between 1900 and 1930, an estimated 10 percent of Mexico's population departed north in order to find gainful employment.<sup>23</sup>

Domestic agricultural interests welcomed this influx of inexpensive, and often desperate labor.<sup>24</sup> Growers collaborated with labor contractors and the railroads to develop a highly organized system to expedite delivery of Mexican workers to large farms.<sup>25</sup> Lax enforcement of the border in early 1900s, combined with the services of labor contractors

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and the railroads, made for a relatively easy journey between Mexico and the United States.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, agriculturalists developed an effective recruitment campaign to make Mexican workers aware of opportunities to the north, and in the process made a significant contribution toward increasing the volume of immigration.<sup>27</sup>

During the First World War, agriculturalists successfully lobbied politicians to provide conditions favorable for Mexican immigration.<sup>28</sup> Growers argued that the First World War created a labor shortage, and that a steady supply of Mexican labor would be necessary to keep food on American tables. The U.S. secretary of labor responded to the farmers' entreaties and exempted Mexicans from the 1917 Immigration Act's head tax and literacy restrictions. Although created under the auspices of alleviating a wartime labor shortage, grower pressure kept the exemption in force until 1921.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, Congress continued to erect barriers to European and Asian immigration, but frequently exempted Mexicans from such anti-immigrant legislation because growers valued their docility and inexpensive labor.<sup>30</sup> In an effort to assuage Anglo fears that Mexicans would "destroy the culture," agriculturalists developed a "bird of passage" myth.<sup>31</sup> Growers maintained that Mexicans would head south for the winter and not disturb white culture; incidentally, this tale also served to bolster the myth of the agrarian ideal because the Mexican workers allegedly were only needed to provide periodic assistance on family farms.<sup>32</sup> Apparently comforted by the story that Mexicans would only remain for the harvest, Anglo society accepted their presence.<sup>33</sup> While Americans became addicted to an inexpensive food supply, those who harvested the bounty were generally unwelcome in white neighborhoods and lived in separate barrios.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, because they were perceived as temporary, they could be, and were, politically marginalized.<sup>35</sup>

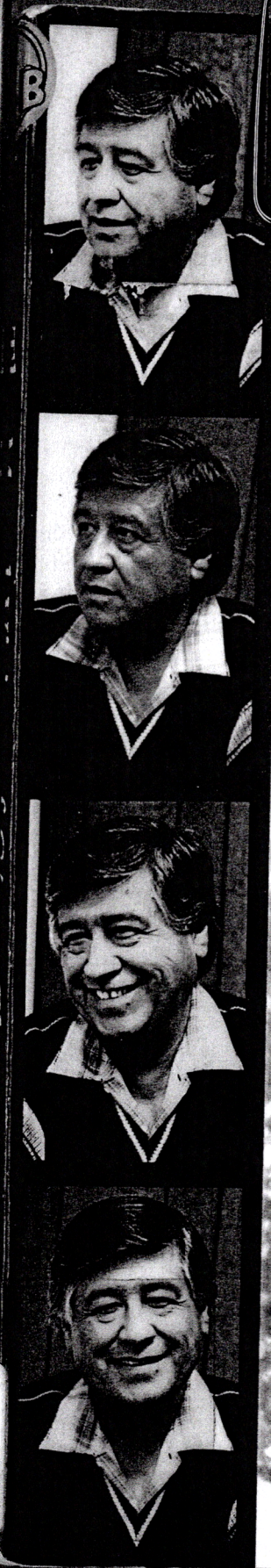
As America sank into the Great Depression, the farmworkers who helped enable high U.S. standards of living were sent back to Mexico for "threatening" the "American" way of life.<sup>36</sup> The reaction to Mexican workers shifted from a warm welcome to a curt goodbye.<sup>37</sup> By the 1930s, it appeared that America wanted to send the "birds of passage" back home.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, growers were displeased to lose their inexpensive, docile, and hardworking labor force; nonetheless, popular pressure incited a mass deportation of immigrants during the 1930s, which included many Mexican farmworkers.<sup>39</sup> Between 1929 and 1931, an estimated three hundred thousand Mexicans and Mexican Americans returned to Mexico.<sup>40</sup>

**CHÁVEZ,  
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**WORKERS'  
SOCIAL JUSTICE**

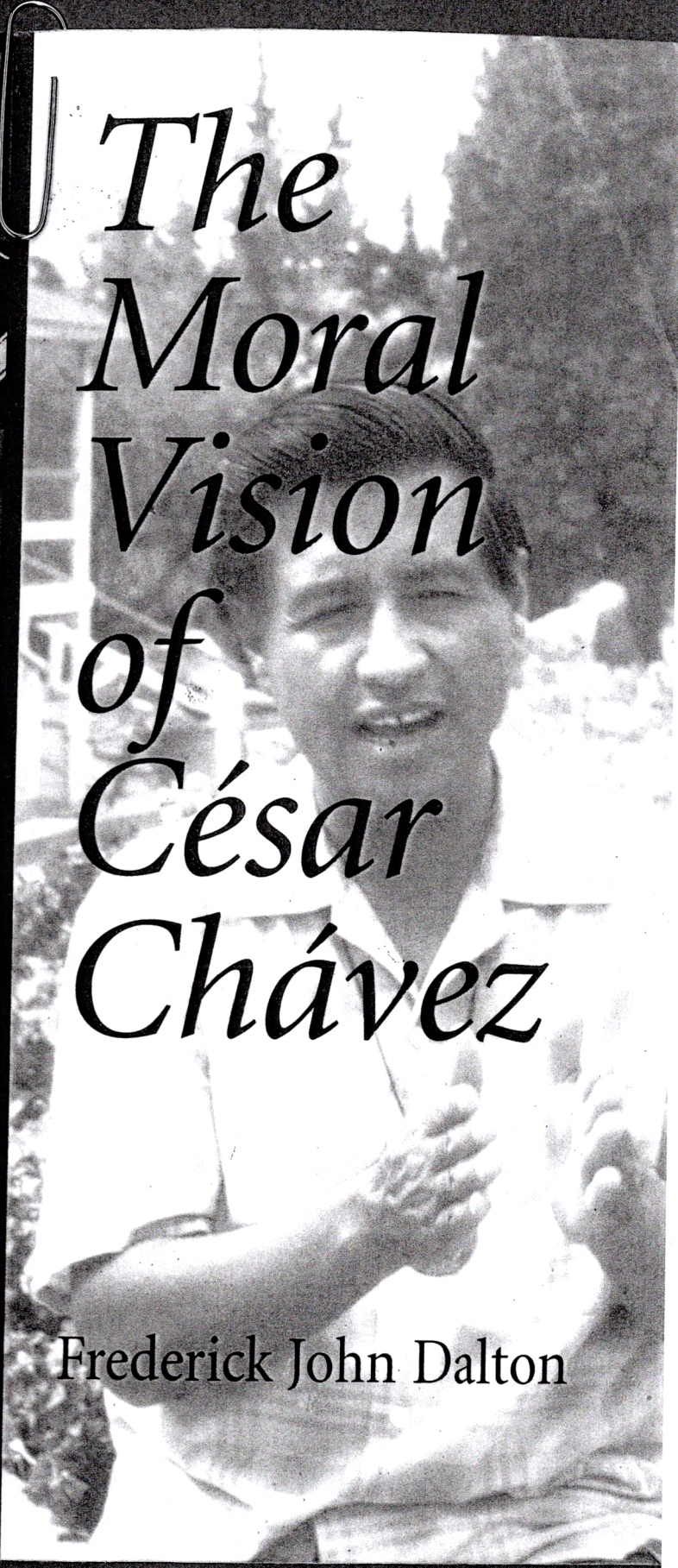


**UNITY**



*The  
Moral  
Vision  
of  
César  
Chávez*

Frederick John Dalton



workers. The statement also insists that public authorities have an obligation to protect such organizations by law. The bishops categorically state that it is "unjust for farmers or grower organizations to strive to prevent by reprisal the legitimate efforts of farm laborers to form worker associations or unions."<sup>65</sup>

The third major section of the document restates longstanding Catholic moral teaching on the right of workers to organize trade unions and strike work.

The final section of the bishops' statement calls on political leaders to take steps to include farm workers under provisions of the National Labor Relations Act and to extend to field laborers the legislative protection other workers receive, such as fair labor standards, minimum hours and wages, unemployment insurance, and health and safety provisions. The California bishops' statement on Catholic moral teaching and the farm-labor dispute made clear that the church accepted in principle many of the goals Chávez's union sought in practice. The church's longstanding moral teaching on labor issues, made clear in the midst of the farm-labor dispute in California's vineyards, raised the ire of many Catholic growers, labor contractors, and others doing business in agriculture. Catholic social teaching on labor issues and economic justice was new and bewildering to many people who had been faithful Catholics all their lives, and many rejected it and felt betrayed by the church.

### *Bringing Divisions among People*

Chávez's farm-worker movement was confrontational and divisive, perhaps more so because of the religious and moral issues at stake in the struggle between growers and laborers. The grape strike and boycotts split people apart—people in civic communities and social and business groups as well as people in religious communities. Religious leaders acted as mediators at various times during *la causa*, seeking to bring justice and harmony in the midst of injustice and rancor. In July 1967 the first union jurisdictional pact between the Teamsters and the UFWOC was mediated by Fr. Eugene Boyle, a Catholic priest, Rev. Richard Byfield, an Episcopal minister, and Rabbi Joseph Glazer. The agreement ended a ten-month strike and boycott against Perelli-Minetti. The Perelli-Minetti struggle illustrates the complex ways the religious communities affiliated with the church became entangled in the union's actions. When the UFWOC called for a boycott of Perelli-Minetti products, it included Assumption Abbey brand liquor. Assumption Abbey liquor was linked to a foundation in North Dakota through which the Benedictines, a Catholic religious community, received a royalty on every bottle sold. The spirits were produced by Perelli-Minetti under a licensing agreement with the Benedictines. The line between religious and secular spheres of life is often difficult to draw.

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While the Benedictines were indirectly drawn into the fray, the Christian Brothers were a more direct target. Christian Brothers, a Catholic religious order, owned Mount La Salle Vineyards, which operated the Alta Vista Ranch outside the town of Reedley in the San Joaquin Valley. The negotiations between the UFWOC and the Christian Brothers did not go well at first. Chavez charged, "We know Christian Brothers are anti-union and their operation is a commercial venture like any other; they are separated from the Church and its social policies. We expected Christian Brothers to live up to the social pronouncements of the Church, but they have not."<sup>66</sup> In the midst of the troubled negotiations, *El Malcriado* ran an article entitled "Christian Brothers—Hear Your Popes." The article in the farm-worker newspaper said, "What confuses California's farm workers is the unfortunate discrepancy between what three illustrious popes have said about labor—and what Christian Brothers does about labor."<sup>67</sup> The article quotes popes John XXIII, Paul VI, and Leo XIII, and it chastises the Christian Brothers for not applying Catholic social teaching to its own commercial activities in the vineyards. Eventually a union contract between the UFWOC and the Christian Brothers was signed.

At times, from the union's point of view, it appeared that the church could only be prodded to action with great effort and in the face of public embarrassment. Mark Day writes:

During the strike, Cesar frequently made references to the social teachings of the Catholic Church. He was forced to conclude, however, that these documents had been confined to theory and seldom put into practice. "The church has lost the working classes in Europe, and it may very well lose large segments of the working class in this country too, unless something drastic is done."

I asked Cesar about his feelings toward the church one evening when he and his wife, Helen, had supper at Guadalupe church rectory with me and some visiting priests. "Most farm workers are Chicanos," Cesar said, "And most Chicanos are Catholics. The church is the only institution which our people are closely associated with. When the church does not respond to us, we get offended, and we are tempted to lash out against it.

"You know," he continued, "there are many changes in the church today. But many of these changes, like the new ritual of the Mass, are merely external. What I like to see is a priest get up and speak about things like racism and poverty. But, even when you hear about these things from the pulpit, you get the feeling that they aren't doing anything significant to alleviate these evils. They are just talking about them.

"Here in Delano, the church has been such a stranger to us, that our own people tend to put it together with all the powers and institutions that oppose them."<sup>68</sup>