

CÉSAR CHÁVEZ: RECOGNIZING HIS ACHIEVEMENT—AND ITS LIMITATIONS

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The forthcoming film *Cesar Chavez: An American Hero* will be opening in cities across the country on April 4, 2014 and already it has stirred discussion and debate among labor union activists, academics, and those on the left. Duane Campbell in a review titled “Cesar Chavez, The UFW and Strategic Racism” published on the website Talking Union: A Project of the DSA Labor Network” rightly praises Chávez as an inspiration to union activists but takes to task several writers—Frank Bardacke, Steve Early, Bruce Neuberger, and Miriam Pawel—for their criticism of the famous Mexican American farm worker organizer. He might also have included my book on Chávez.

Cambell writes, “These books argue a peculiar point of view; they strongly and persistently imply that current problems of exploitation of workers in farm labor was caused by the destructive behavior of Cesar Chavez, his instability, and his ego—not by corporate agriculture; not by the racist state in rural California.” Campbell, in my view distorts the views and the criticisms of Chavez’s critics. I cannot speak for the other, but let me say for myself that I believe that Chávez was a remarkable organizer and an inspiring leader whose dedication and sacrifices for his union and for the Mexican American community are unquestionable. And of course we understand that the principal reason the farm workers were ultimately defeated in the 1980s (a defeat seldom acknowledged by Chavez’s uncritical supporters) was principally because of the power of California agribusiness, the Republican Party, and Governors Ronald Reagan and George Deukmejian.

But, we must also recognize that in many ways César Chávez—his overalls and plaid shirt notwithstanding—became a labor union bureaucrat, that is, an authoritarian leader who thought, who believed, who *knew* what was best for the union’s rank and file. This is not a statement about his “ego and his instability,” though those were also problems. We are critical of Chávez because of his *politics*. He imposed on the originally Filipino farm workers union with which he had merged his Mexican contingent and on the collection of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and atheist labor union lawyers, researchers, advisors, organizers, and supporters of the union his Mexican nationalist and Roman Catholic ideology and symbols.

We should remember that he called in the immigration authorities to expel undocumented workers from the fields and opposed organizing the undocumented, just as he opposed attempts to organize on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. He came to prioritize the boycott over the workers’ own power in the fields, above all the strike. At times through his hunger strikes he personally substituted his heroic deed for the union members' own action.

Chávez refused to create local unions where workers might have elected their own leaders and he was infuriated by rank-and-file initiative in the union. When challenged either by his staff or the members, he drove the critics out. Allied with Walter Reuther, the president of the United Auto Workers, and with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, Chávez brought the United Farm workers into the Democratic Party to which it became politically subordinate, dependent economically on government subsidies to its organization.

During his lifetime, before he died and ascended into Sainthood, César Chávez was openly criticized for these political problems in the Mexican American community and in the labor movement by activists such as the late Bert Corona who explained his difference with Chávez in his *Memories of*

Chicano History. Yet today, we are expected to “speak no ill of the dead.” We have to find this peculiar, because we are all engaged in an on-going combination of organizing and criticism of our movement which shows no such respect for other unions or social movements.

The problems that I and other biographers of Chávez and writers on the union have described and discussed are not in any way different that the problems that existed in other labor unions and federations at the time whether they were headed by George Meany, Jimmy Hoffa, Sr., or Walter Reuther. More recently we have had Andy Stern, Jimmy Hoffa, Jr., and Bob King. Left, right, and center, we have had a bureaucratic caste in the union, often receiving higher salaries and better benefits than the workers they represent (something not true of Chávez), leaders with the belief that they understand better than the workers, the situation of union, the employers, and the government. These union officials have maintained an authoritarian grip on the unions since the upheaval of the 1930s and only rarely have rank-and-file organizations been able to pry their fingers the ledger, safe, and gavel.

Chávez’s problems were only a variant on the universal problem of American unionism, even though they developed in a union in what was at times in a heroic life-and-death struggle with the employers, something which had also been true for other unions in their early days. Remember that most of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions born in the blood, tears, and joy of the sit-down strikes, were also born-bureaucratic, delivered by midwife John L. Lewis.

I do not doubt that the power of agribusiness and the Republicans in the State of California was mainly responsible for the undoing of United Farm Workers, a defeat which leaves them with only a toehold in the fields in California today. But I and some of the other critics, if I read them right, believe that it might have been possible to create another sort of labor union, one based on a democratic internal organization, on the workers’ own power in the fields and in society, and politically independent of the two parties of big business. Would such a union have been able to beat back the growers and overcome the rightwing politicians? Might such a model have had a greater influence on other unions at the time and have triggered a broader rank-and-file rebellion. We cannot say, but, even had it been defeated anyway, it would have left a better legacy on which to build.