

One of the nation's largest labor organizations, the Teamsters combined a series of contradictory characteristics in this era. The apparent independence of the local unions had long been constrained by a variety of formal and informal mechanisms of control wielded by the national leadership. In the same way, the notorious relationships between some local leaders and organized crime, as well as the penchant of some of these same leaders to resort to strong-arm tactics, coexisted with a range of dynamic organizing tactics that often put this union at the forefront of organizing unskilled workers in previous bastions of anti-unionism. Mobbed-up officials attracted much attention, but the union's leadership amounted to much more than a collection of thugs. The Teamsters' size reflected the organization's willingness to embrace dynamic tactics and welcome a wide range of workers. It was that dynamic role, along with the persistent existence of leaders such as Brewster and his subordinates in Portland, that made the Teamsters a lightning rod for controversy. Donnelly's deft treatment of police corruption in Portland makes it clear that he is capable of embracing this level of complexity in his scholarship, but the portrayal of the Teamsters' role in this history falls a bit short of that mark. Donnelly's book remains, however, a significant piece of scholarship. It provides pioneering research into a scandal with important ramifications for twentieth-century American labor history.

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### **From the Jaws of Victory:**

#### **The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement**

Matt Garcia

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In one of those crisp, simple, declarative sentences rarely found in a scholarly book, Matt Garcia writes, "Cesar Chavez created the most successful farm worker movement in United States history" (2). He then spends much of the rest of the book detailing how that heroic success turned disastrously, painfully, even embarrassingly, wrong. After the glory years of the sixties and early seventies, Chavez, unable to keep his eyes on the prize, lost his vision, abused his power, and descended into a kind of cultish irrelevance. Garcia tells this tale in heart-wrenching detail. Anyone who cares about working people will feel this as a punch straight to the gut.

A spate of recent, often excellent, books on the United Farm Workers (UFW) has filled up the shelves, but Garcia's has a particularly strong angle on the subject—it is an institutional history in its finest, most vibrant form. He gets into the issues that we do not hear enough about in the literature: the nitty-gritty of organizing, campaign strategy, personality, mentoring, ego, commitment, determination, and the connected emotions of triumph, defeat, surrender, and exhaustion. Labor organizing is one messy enterprise, and this book is an invaluable compendium of what Garcia calls "usable knowledge." *From the Jaws of Victory* should be mandatory reading as both beacon of hope and cautionary tale for any young person about to embark on the organizer's life. This is how it was done, and this is

how it was undone. This is how people committed themselves to a mission, and this is how that mission got hollowed out. This is how people found themselves in *La Causa*, and this is how *La Causa* used and betrayed them.

The story of the first half of this book is a retelling of stories familiar to those steeped in labor history and lore: the end of the Bracero Program, the rise of Chavez under the mentorship of Fred Ross, the power of the boycott (and the gift of working outside of the National Labor Relations Act), the struggles to bring together Mexican and Filipino workers, the rare and promising unity of civil rights and labor rights movements, the place of people such as Bobby Kennedy, and the role of institutions such as the AFL-CIO and the Teamsters. That triumphant tale comes to a close in July 1970 after the five-year-long Delano grape strike ended in an enormous, unprecedented victory for some of the hardest working people in the nation. Contracts were good, wages were up, social services looked promising, and the union controlled the hiring process.

Then it all went to hell. By 1973, the union had lost most of its contracts and appeared to be on the verge of collapse. Many activists and commentators have pointed to the nefarious role of the Nixon administration, the Teamsters, and the growers in charting the decline of farm workers, but Garcia looks directly at the UFW leadership. He avoids the morality-tale trap of seeing the union's victories as a product of the magical power of solidarity and the defeats accountable to the untrammelled power of employers or the state. Instead, he correctly sees opposition as a constant. The union's job is to adapt to new challenges produced by new circumstances—not bemoan change.

Unfortunately, that adaptation did not happen. The once-great leader lacked the imagination and the will to adapt to new circumstances, including a string of organizing and political defeats, as well as a tortured relationship with one of the movement's few big successes of the seventies, the passage of California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act. As Garcia writes, "By the early 1970s Chavez began to show signs of addiction to the boycott and his own power" (116). By mid-decade, the union was in an odd position—what Chavez was not ashamed to call a "movement without members." Headquarters was a beehive of activity and publicity, but there were dwindling numbers of dues-paying members protected by contracts.

The iron law of oligarchy seems to be in full force in this story, made worse as Chavez slipped into dramatically erratic behavior as the seventies progressed. As things went bad for the union, Garcia argues, Chavez lashed out all around. Rather than embracing debate and a diversity of viewpoints, he began to hunt down anybody who might be a dissident in union headquarters, the legal department, and even the executive board. Chavez then got caught up in the methods of Charles Dederich, a supposed drug-rehabilitation expert who had evolved into a cult leader, to root out "the assholes" (a term Chavez embraced regularly).

Chavez's turn to Dederich and his therapy cult Synanon is the most disturbing turn of events in this study. The core value at the UFW's remote headquarters devolved into strict discipline and obedience to what was becoming little more than a commune and personality cult. Chavez mobilized the confrontational methods known as "the game," a system developed by Dederich to control his members. According to Gilbert Padilla, one of the original stalwarts of the farm workers' movement, Chavez's once vibrant approach to organizing had been reduced to a "one policy, one mind" culture, predicated on the belief that "anybody who differed with that was out to fuck the union" (192). (*From the Jaws of Victory*, by the way, wins the award for most F-bombs used in a labor history book—an indi-

cation of the quality and intimacy of its sources.) Fiddling with mind-cult activities while the union burned, at one point Chavez tried to impose the practice of referring to board members as "prophets." He said that the game might deliver them to heaven, and claimed to run the union with his "aura." Then came the purges, fears of assassins, self-pity, exposure of alleged sabotage, and an "imaginary world of conspirators and double agents" intent on harming the declining institution. Fear, heartache, and betrayal swept through the volunteers, leaving little of substance behind.

Garcia's somewhat generous argument about this mess is clear: he pins the union's fate on Chavez's failure to keep his organizer's imagination alive. "Chavez's greatest failure may not have been his flirtations with communal living, creating a new religion, or attempting to control the minds of his followers through the bevy of devices borrowed from self-made prophets. Rather, his failures were quite familiar to social movements that have harbored a dream of institutionalizing social justice: Chavez failed to adapt his strategy to fit the demands of a dynamic situation" (287). Chavez's floundering makes his earlier resistance to the idea of the boycott more significant, but a social movement must find its institutional form to survive, and that is exactly where Chavez failed. The UFW had few ideas about how to change from social movement to dynamic institution. Readers interested in what was going on in the fields at the same time need to read Frank Bardacke's *Trampling out the Vintage*, which offers a nice grassroots balance to Garcia's valuable inner-workings-of-the-union approach—and certainly a more inspirational tale.

Like any good book with a clear and powerful perspective, this one suffers a bit from its greatest strength. The power of Garcia's research lies in his detailed look at the inner workings of an organization in both victory and failure, yet it remains completely insulated from the (admittedly elusive) landscape of national moods and cultural shifts. This is particularly curious given that the UFW's rise and fall map easily onto national history. Not just the UFW but the entire country seemed to lose its sense of direction after the optimism of the sixties, and, like Chavez, turned back to the land, neo-independence, and religious/cultish revivalism in the seventies. What part of this union history is therefore a reflection of national culture, and what part is solely due to institutional failure as Garcia argues, remain untouched questions. Absent in this book is what *Time* magazine thought reflected the moment in 1975: "The public seems to have grown tired of causes. Today, few housewives even know that Chavez has called for another boycott and still fewer observe it." Perhaps that is because Chavez lost his way, unable to get beyond his own limits, but maybe Chavez lost his way as the dizzying cultural terrain shifted right under his feet. Do the times unmake the man or the man unmake the times?

*From the Jaws of Victory* is a brave, painful, and important book about a tragic movement and a tragic hero. "There are two tragedies in life," lamented George Bernard Shaw. "One is to lose your heart's desire. The other is to gain it." Cesar Chavez got both. He gained his dream of organizing farm workers in California only to lose not only his achievements but, seemingly, the desire in his heart. Today, while one can enjoy a drive down any one of a number of Cesar Chavez boulevards while enjoying a state-sanctioned Cesar Chavez holiday, there remain exactly zero grape workers covered by a union contract. Tragic history indeed.

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