

Farmworker Oratory 1966

Cesar Chavez, founder of the National Farm Workers Association, and I were present at a labor convention in San Francisco, where he and Larry Itliong, strike director for the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, had been asked to speak to the union delegates about the grape strike in Delano, which at that time was only a few months old.

Larry went first. He began his speech with a note of self-deprecation, saying that he was a simple person, uneducated and unsophisticated; he was just a field worker. After this brief introduction, he began to shout at the top of his voice and to gesticulate as if he were in a union hall meeting urging Filipino cannery workers to go on strike for better piece rates. He hurled venomous challenges at the growers, he regaled his audience with a never-ending series of clichés lauding the rights of workers, and worse yet, he carried on far too long. The union delegates applauded.

Cesar Chavez spoke next, and the contrast could not have been greater. Cesar projected a quiet, humble, and sincere presence, and he talked simply about the struggle of farmworkers to form a union. He did not speak long, and he barely raised his voice. The delegates were electrified, and they wanted to contribute right now, right here, to the strike fund.

Cesar knew how to use his lack of traditional oratorical skills to his benefit. To his detriment, Larry did not know how to use his.