

Kern County Courthouse Cathedral 1968

Cesar Chavez was in the second week of his Fast for Non-Violence and living at the Forty Acres. Farmworkers were coming from miles around to visit Cesar, attend the daily mass in the evening, and moving into the tent city we had set up. Just as we had transformed the newly constructed co-op gas station building into a chapel, we were building a 24-hour-a-day farmworker city.

Perhaps that is how the idea came up. We would transform the Kern County Courthouse into a farmworker cathedral so that when Cesar had to make his court appearance to answer charges filed by the growers claiming that he was fomenting violence, the playing field of justice would be more level.

In those days we were young, and working around the clock meant nothing. Marshall Ganz took the lead in organizing thousands of farmworkers to descend on the multistory courthouse building several hours before Cesar Chavez arrived. Marshall and I led the unending column of workers into the building when it opened and we lined all the corridors on all the floors. A hushed and profound silence settled over the courthouse as the workers began to softly pray the rosary and other religious devotions. All was ready, and as we escorted Cesar into the building to walk the silent corridors to the designated courtroom, not a word or a *viva!* was uttered.

For the first time in its short history, the farmworker movement had officially arrived in Bakersfield, the county seat of California agribusiness. The grower's attorney was furious and represented to the presiding judge that the presence of the praying farmworkers was intimidating.

"Mr. Quinlan," the judge replied, "if I order this courthouse cleared, it will just be another example of gringo justice. I don't consider this to be intimidation." The day's hearing was canceled. The farmworkers filed out as silently as they had entered. It took nearly an hour to vacate the newly consecrated cathedral building.

Jerry Cohen, the general counsel for the farmworkers' union, has said many times that because of this farmworker demonstration, he never again felt the oppressiveness of the Kern County justice system when he entered the courtroom to represent the legal rights of farmworkers.