
**Reviewed by** Timothy Bowman (West Texas A&M University)

**Published on** H-Environment (August, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Over the past twenty years or so, a notable shift has occurred in the study of the United Farm Workers (UFW) and its famed leader, César Estrada Chávez. The original generation of scholarship in the late twentieth century focused on organizational activity, religious iconography, and the leadership qualities of Chávez, who stylized himself—intentionally or otherwise—as the modern-day Catholic version of a Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. More recently, however, newer studies have cast a more critical light on the movement and particularly its figurehead. Miriam Pawel's *The Union of their Dreams* (2009) and Matt Garcia's *From the Jaws of Victory* (2012), among others, humanized Chávez and *la causa*, chronicling in sometimes painful detail the UFW leader's shortcomings alongside his successes.

If Christian O. Paiz's new book, *The Strikers of Coachella*, is any indication, UFW historiography might be on the cusp of entering into newer, more productive territory. “If earlier historians fawned over a saintly Chavez,” Paiz writes, “the new generation castigates [him] in disillusionment,” which risks further silencing the multitude of voices and perspectives that were in fact involved in strikes, boycotts, and sacrifices on behalf of migrant farmworkers (p. 18). Speaking directly to this historiographical imbalance, Paiz utilizes over two hundred hours of oral history interviews to reconstruct the movement in a specific locale—California’s Coachella Valley—from a bottom-up perspective. The results are equal parts tragic, engaging, and perhaps most importantly, paradigm-shifting.

One of the important things that Paiz does is setting up whom the UFW was fighting against in the Coachella Valley from the 1960s through the 1980s. Paiz refers to fruit and vegetable growers in the area as constituting “Rancher Nation,” in which growers owned complete power and where workers’ collective “exploitation enriched the kingdom” (p. 25). Notably, the insurgents in this “kingdom” did not always agree on how to oppose their overlords before the farmworkers’ movement began; nor would there typically be full agreement afterward, which is part of Paiz's lar-
ger point. As explained in chapter 2, Filipinos and ethnic Mexicans, despite long histories of working-class advocacy up to the middle of the twentieth century, had previously failed to come together. Mexican nationals who came into the area during the Bracero era (1942-64) also almost never antagonized growers. Finally, Mexican Americans often criticized and rejected Mexican immigrants, perhaps in an effort not to jeopardize their own precarious positioning in local society. Fissures in the Rancher Nation's working-class community would still only sometimes be bridged after the farmworker movement's onset.

The UFW movement's beginnings in the Coachella Valley stemmed from many sources. The historiography has already long established the fact of the movement's dual origins in the Filipino-led Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) and the Chávez-led National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in the mid-1960s. When Chávez arrived in the Coachella Valley in late 1967, a pair of local activists were so enthused at the promise of a new future that they composed a corrido, “Cesar Chavez's Arrival to the Coachella Valley,” to commemorate the coming activities at the local level (p. 85). Subsequent grape strikes did occur in the Coachella Valley in 1968 and 1969, each respectively bringing the region’s diverse laboring classes together in new ways. As Paiz chronicles in chapter 4, such efforts helped bring growers to the negotiating table. As in other parts of California, from 1970 to 1973, Coachella workers enjoyed contracts with growers, which resulted in better wages, working conditions, and also a sense of self-determination for the new decade. Perhaps as importantly, these victories overlapped with the height of Chicano activism at the local level. Rancher Nation seemed to be in “retreat,” but unfortunately, the period’s many victories would quickly become unraveled.

Part 3 of the book analyzes, among other things, what went wrong after the victories of the early 1970s. As Paiz chronicles in chapter 6, problems in the Coachella Valley's insurgency against the Rancher Nation included a lack of preparedness in the UFW's local offices, Filipino resentment against the UFW's Mexican and Mexican American leadership, and the inability of Chicano activists to “eliminate ethnic Mexicans’ subjected position in the Coachella Valley,” despite, of course, some victories at the local level (p. 163). The height of the tension between the two sides stretched from 1973 to 1974, whereupon Rancher Nation aligned itself with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Union against the UFW, an alliance that the Chávez-led union could not muster enough strength to truly overcome. The rest of the 1970s would prove to be a decade mixed with successes and failures. The California State Legislature passed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) in 1975, which guaranteed state farmworkers the right to collective bargaining. Chicano activists likewise made progress in institution building and community service in the Coachella Valley. Nonetheless, despite these achievements, the UFW entered into something of a decline, perhaps most notably in its general lack of appeal to non-Mexican farmworkers at the regional level.

The book’s final two chapters take the story through the late 1970s and into the mid-1980s, which is a time period that most histories of the UFW fail to examine. As Paiz notes in chapter 9, the ALRA proved to be “toothless and glacial” by the 1980s, which allowed Rancher Nation to effectively outmaneuver the UFW prior to Chávez’s death in 1993 (p. 252). In his powerful concluding chapter, “Here Is Where We Meet,” Paiz takes the Coachella Valley story up to contemporary times, showing the aftereffects of the Chicano movement and the UFW in the Coachella Valley; the author even takes the story down to the personal level, discussing his experiences growing up in the region. Paiz does this not only to show the contingency and lack of inevitability in the area’s modern history, but he also departs from other historians and writers in making an important point about the UFW’s history—it wasn’t all in vain. As
the author so eloquently puts it: “But what is evident now is that social movements are never in vain, even when they fall short of their visions; that everything has an effect, whether seen or not; that afterlives remain, even if only as dying among dear friends or as traces insisting on another world. Know we have not yet lost” (p. 276).

Indeed, the struggles of the “rank-and-file” highlighted in this empathetic, well-researched, and highly readable study will only continue. The Strikers of Coachella is a must-read for scholars of labor, activism, and farmworker histories.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59096

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.