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Family Quarrel Imperils a Labor Hero's Legacy

By JENNIFER MEDINA

KEENE, Calif. — A series of dirt roads in this tiny Central Valley town leads to a warren of homes and offices that has been, for decades, the headquarters of the [United Farm Workers union](#). This is where [Cesar Chavez](#), the labor and civil rights leader, carved out a retreat and raised his family. In a former tuberculosis sanatorium, the Chavez children learned the lessons of the union and listened to endless conversations about the backbreaking work in the nearby fields.

Now, they are engaged in a simmering battle over the future of the union and its affiliated groups, with the rising tension threatening to accelerate the decline of the once-mighty movement.

In March, Anthony Chavez, the youngest son of Cesar Chavez, filed a lawsuit alleging that his brother Paul wrongfully fired him and is withholding thousands of dollars in pension benefits. According to the lawsuit, Paul Chavez, the president of National Farm Workers Service Center, a network of nonprofit groups that grew out of the union, has created a hostile work environment that has pushed out several employees.

“It’s like all the history, nothing mattered,” Anthony Chavez, 51, said in an interview in the modest home here where he lives with his wife and two of their children. The office where he used to work is

just a few steps away, and Paul Chavez's home is even closer; a slice of his house is visible from Anthony's back door.

When Cesar Chavez was alive, he was a major force in California politics and agriculture. "The problem now is that the organization has simply drifted," said Miriam Pawel, who has written a [book about the union](#) and is working on a biography of Mr. Chavez. "It has become a family-run organization that is sort of purposeless and does little or nothing to help farm workers."

The lawsuit alleges that Paul Chavez, 54, refused to fire an employee who stole \$500,000 from the organization and instead urged his brother to get rid of one employee who looked as though he "needed to see a mortician."

The case is a window on the strife within the generation that took control of the movement after Mr. Chavez's death in 1993. Decades ago, he became a national figure, leading farm workers to picket lines and using boycotts to secure union contracts for the notoriously underpaid workers. Now, just a tiny fraction of the nearly half a million farm workers in California operate with a contract.

The National Farm Workers Service Center has for years focused on housing, political lobbying and community services, as well as [Radio Campesina](#), a network of Spanish-language stations aimed at farm workers. Anthony Chavez ran the network for more than a decade, taking it from a group of nonprofit low-signal stations to several commercial outlets that generated income for the other projects at the center. This year, the Service Center merged with the Cesar Chavez Foundation, which focuses its effort on promoting the image of the legendary leader.

Paul Chavez, through a spokesman, declined to be interviewed, but defended the foundation's work in a statement.

"It is regrettable that Anthony chose this course," he said. "But this is not a family matter; it is an employment issue." He added, "After everything is past, we will still be a family and will be able to put all this behind us."

Family members, without exception, talk about Cesar Chavez with deep reverence. They blanch at any criticism of the movement, as they refer to the broad work of the union under his watch.

But that unity is now fractured. After his father died, Paul Chavez took over most of the operations, although the union itself is led by his brother-in-law Arturo Rodriguez. Several siblings and former employees of the union said in interviews that Paul Chavez was hurting the organization, getting rid of those he did not get along with.

Liz Villarino, one of Mr. Chavez's daughters, worked for years as the controller for the service center while her husband ran an organization that offered classes to farm workers. But in late 2008, Ms. Villarino said, she grew frustrated that not enough was being done to organize workers in the fields, and she quit. Several months later, her husband also broke from the group.

"There was never any clear direction," Ms. Villarino said. "There wasn't any focus on the bigger picture. Eventually, I said, this isn't what it used to be, and I left. But they were just waiting for me to leave."

Ms. Villarino said that she told her brother on multiple occasions that they should be more focused on workers, rather than finding ways to bring in money, but that her concerns were dismissed.

"Paul cares more about building his assets than helping people," she said. "He wants all the power to be the go-to person whenever people have questions about his father and his legacy and create his own little empire."

Ms. Villarino and other siblings have hardly spoken with Paul Chavez since he fired his brother in 2009. And while they live just yards from each other, the two brothers have not exchanged a word since then.

Cesar Chavez's widow, Helen Chavez, 83, also lives on the grounds in Keene. Her children say they have tried to avoid talking about the battles with her. Anthony Chavez said he tried to press for a settlement before taking the case to court, but when that went nowhere, he told his mother that he

planned to sue. Even now, he fears his brother will kick him off the property, which is controlled by the foundation.

“Just because we are the children of Helen and Cesar Chavez doesn’t mean we are good people,” he said, choking back tears.

One of Anthony’s sons still works for the radio station in Bakersfield, among the few family members still working with the organization. Just a few years ago, more than a dozen family members were employed in some capacity for the farm workers.

“The movement was our family; there was no distinction between our family and the movement,” Ms. Villarino said. “Everything we did revolved around the movement. That doesn’t exist at all anymore.”

The deeper loss, others say, is what has happened to farm workers since Cesar Chavez’s death.

“In many ways, we’re back to square one for farm workers,” said Mike Davis, a California historian and a former union activist. “We have this wonderful myth and a model for kids to emulate in Cesar Chavez, but you could basically go to any field and rewrite ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ all over again.”



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